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Problem of Practice Project: Developing Instructional Leadership of Assistant Principals

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE PROJECT:
DEVELOPING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

BY
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ABSTRACT

Research has established that one of the most important functions assistant principals can learn is how to be an instructional leader. Some school districts have incorporated problem-based learning (PBL) in their building-level principal preparation programs for assistant principals. This study examined one approach to PBL, the Problem of Practice (PoP) project embedded in the new Level II Certification Program of a central Florida school district through a case study of six assistant principals' experiences and perspectives based on interview, meeting observations and artifact data. The study revealed major challenges associated with implementation of the PoP projects and found that collaboration with the Level II committee was critical for their completion. The study also identified that the integration of the PoP project into the School Improvement Plan seems to be key to the success of the PoP projects. The recommendations based on these findings are made to district leaders as they continue to improve the PoP project as a central feature of the Level II Certification Program.

Keywords: problem-based learning; assistant principal training; leadership certification program

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem of Practice and Local Context

Research has established that one of the most important functions assistant principals can learn is how to be an instructional leader (Boerma, 2011; Brown & Chai, 2012; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Lynch, 2012; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; O’Doherty & Ovando, 2013; Portin, 2004; Turnbull, Haslam, Arcaira, Riley, Sinclair, & Coleman, 2009). However, studies have found that the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders has traditionally be underutilized in many school districts where there are limited professional development opportunities for them to learn how to develop instructional leadership (Clayton, 2014; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017). In Florida, assistant principals have the opportunity to exercise instructional leadership through supervising and evaluating teacher performance (Florida Department of Education, 2018).

Assistant principals can support instruction and learning by creating a safe, distraction-free learning environment (Sheng, Wolff, Kilmer, & Yager, 2017). They may also support learning by providing high-quality curriculum materials and resources to teachers. Leading professional development is another way that assistant principals can indirectly influence learning (Sheng et. al., 2017). Assistant principals directly influence student learning by visiting classrooms regularly, having conversations with teachers about instructional practices, and providing targeted feedback (Oleszewski et. al., 2012; Sheng et. al., 2017; Thompson, 2013).

The assistant principals who aspire to become principals need to be provided with rich learning opportunities to develop as instructional leaders through a district principal preparation program. However, principal preparation programs face challenges in providing adequate

training for assistant principals. Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) wrote, “unquestionably, current policy initiatives (such as Race to the Top) and methodological developments in educational research underscore the imperative for greater clarity and accuracy regarding the attributes and qualities of principal preparation programs and their effects on school leaders, teachers, and students” (p. 25).

There is growing awareness of the need to support assistant principals in their preparation as future principals with strong skills in instructional leadership. Problem-based learning (PBL) has been identified as a promising way to prepare them as instructional leaders (Bridges, 1989, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1993, 1995). Problem-based learning has been shown to improve the critical thinking skills of aspiring school leaders and provide experience solving real-world problems (Bridges, 1989, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger 1993, 1995; Copland, 2000). This study examined one type of PBL called the Problem of Practice (PoP) project in the principal preparation program for assistant principals offered by Brevard Public Schools, Florida since spring 2018. This study sought to explore assistant principals’ experiences in this new project as they identified a problem of practice, developed focus questions, designed a plan of action, and implemented the plan. The challenges associated with this project are discussed, and two assistant principals’ approaches to implementing this project are further analyzed in detail to compare the differences. The implications for instructional leadership development based on the different approaches to PoP project implementation are discussed.

I have served as an administrator for fifteen years in the Brevard Public School district. Seven of those years have been as a middle and high school principal. Instructional leadership is one of the most important roles I have been expected to fulfill as a school principal. I was trained to become a principal through our school district’s previous level II certification program,

known as the Preparing New Principal's Program (PNPP). The PNPP was based on the Florida Principal Leadership Standards and led to level II certification as a school principal. However, the program did not require candidates to work through problems of practice in instructional leadership that a school principal would be expected to solve. As a result, I noticed blind spots once I became a principal that hampered my effectiveness during my first year. My program provided little experience with developing a comprehensive approach to solving school-wide problems. Further, there was no structure provided that required me to think strategically and creatively to solve problems that affected student learning. I also noticed similar gaps among assistant principals I was assigned to mentor through the same program. Many of them had not been engaged in working through specific school problems in an organized fashion. My protégés could tell me that reading or math was a concern at their school, but they struggled to develop and implement specific plans that could improve student outcomes.

In 2017, the School Board of Brevard County decided to redesign the PNPP program in order to provide more comprehensive training for assistant principals aspiring to the principalship and to more accurately align the professional development provided to assistant principals with the State of Florida's Gold Standard criteria for level II certification. The redesigned principal preparation program is now known as the Level II Certification Program and has been in use since spring 2018 in the district.

The new Level II Certification program is substantially different in design from the previous program used by the School Board of Brevard County. The program contains five different components that provide opportunities for the assistant principal to demonstrate mastery of the leadership standards: (1) reflection on learning in eight priority leadership situations, (2) completion of ten professional development courses on topics pertinent to a

principal's job, (3) program committee's summative review of the candidate through a 360 degree view, (4) six shadowing experiences with reflection, and (5) completion of a problem of practice (PoP) project on topics specified in the district strategic plan.

While each of these activities provides the assistant principal opportunities to gain valuable job-embedded experience, the PoP project is designed to address the instructional core of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards¹. Completion of the PoP project requires deep learning and investigation of topics that are directly connected to the school district's Strategic Plan. These activities require the assistant principal to identify a problem in their own school and approach it from a school improvement perspective at the level required of a school principal. The assistant principal must define the problem, develop focus questions for investigation, design an implementation plan, and carry it out. The assistant principal will assimilate leadership practices from direct experience throughout the process that is designed to promote their own preparation for the principalship. Ideally, the outcome of the problem of practice activity will be improved instructional leadership skills.

Research Questions

I addressed the following research questions based on a case study of six assistant principals who participated in the Level II Certification program in Brevard Public Schools:

1. How do assistant principals in the Level II Certification program identify specific problems of practice, develop focus questions, and create a plan of action to follow in a Problem of Practice (PoP) project?
2. How do assistant principals implement their plan of action in the PoP project?

¹ The Florida Principal Leadership Standards are Florida's core expectations for effective school administrators. The Standards are based on contemporary research on school leadership and represent skill sets and knowledge needed in effective schools (Florida Department of Education, 2019).

3. What explains the differences in assistant principals' implementation of their action plans as instructional leaders?

Significance of the Study

Brevard Public Schools has experienced a significant amount of attrition among K-12 principals in recent years. Thirteen new principals, out of 82 schools, were appointed for the 2017-18 school year alone. This represented 15% of the total number of schools in the entire district under new leadership. In addition, five new principals were hired for the 2018-19 school year. The attrition of principals due to retirement or resignation has placed the school district in the difficult situation of filling these positions with qualified assistant principals.

The district has also seen significant attrition in the assistant principal ranks. There were twenty-six assistant principals hired for the 2017-18 school year to fill positions left vacant due to promotion, retirement, or resignation. The loss of experienced leaders at the assistant principal and principal level is a challenge for the entire district. As a result, increasing capacity of administrators is reflected in the district Strategic Plan Goal 3: Strengthen our workforce through professional growth and continuous improvement enabling them to take on leadership roles within the district (Brevard Public School District Strategic Plan, 2016).

Assistant principals require training and experience to prepare them for the rigors of the day to day job of a school principal because the job of a principal is complex and demanding (Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). The PoP Project embedded within the Level II Certification program provides an opportunity for assistant principals to investigate complex problems in their local context. Since the PoP Project addresses the instructional core of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards, it is well positioned to allow assistant principals to develop the instructional leadership skills necessary to effectively lead a school. Investigating

this specific component of the Level II Certification program will provide the Brevard Public School district with data about how their program meets its stated goals. This information will guide district leaders so that they can refine the Level II Certification program for future cohorts of assistant principals based on the experiences of the first cohort of assistant principals in this new program. This study used a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations of Level II committee meetings, and artifacts from six participants' PoP projects to provide rich description of the experiences of each participant and information for the school district about how they engaged in for their PoP projects.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Hallinger (2000) and Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) framework of instructional leadership. This framework consists of three dimensions: (1) defining the school mission, (2) managing the instructional program, and (3) promoting the school climate. It also includes eight leadership functions and processes: (1) framing and communicating school goals, (2) supervising and evaluating instruction, (3) coordinating curriculum, (4) enforcing academic standards and expectations, (5) monitoring student progress, (6) promoting the professional development of teachers, (7) protecting instructional time, and (8) developing incentives for students and teachers.

Defining the school's mission includes framing the school's goals and communicating them to stakeholders (Hallinger, 2000). Managing the instructional program involves the coordination of the school's instructional program and curriculum materials. Included in this dimension are the tasks of supervising instruction and monitoring student progress (Hallinger, 2000). Each of these tasks require the instructional leader to be heavily involved in the school's instructional program. The last dimension, promoting a positive school-learning climate,

includes leadership functions such as protecting instructional time, professional development for staff, maintaining high visibility, and providing incentives for learning (Hallinger, 2000). Each dimension of the framework informs the daily work of an assistant principal at the building level and provides a lens to analyze assistant principals' experience with the PoP project in relation to instructional leadership.

Summary

The Problem of Practice (PoP) project implemented as part of the new Level II Certification program in Brevard Public Schools holds great promise for improving principal preparation regarding the leadership development of assistant principals. As a new program implemented since spring 2018, it is important to examine the nature of program implementation through the experiences of the assistant principals in the initial cohort. This case study explores the experiences of six assistant principals with the PoP project to identify challenges and variation in their project implementation to guide the future direction of the Level II Certification program. The next chapter will examine the relevant literature on instructional leadership, district principal preparation programs, and problem-based learning (PBL) as the guiding principle of the PoP project.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The role of the assistant principal is important as schools continue to face demands for improved student performance (Clayton, 2014; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017). External pressure placed on public schools in the United States by state and federal accountability measures has resulted in a greater focus on student growth and instructional practice for teachers (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015). Assistant principals are a source of instructional leadership that has been traditionally underutilized in many school districts (Clayton, 2014; Glantz, 1994; Marshall & Greenfield, 1987; Oleszewski et. al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017). Given the demonstrated impact of effective school leadership on student performance, it is important for assistant principals to receive practice and training on the instructional aspects of their jobs (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Unfortunately, principal preparation programs have struggled historically to provide assistant principals with the preparation necessary to ensure success in the principal role (Oleszewski et. al., 2012; Kearney & Herrington, 2013). The breadth of knowledge required of principals makes it difficult for any principal preparation program to fully prepare an assistant principal for the actuality of the principalship (Duncan, Range, & Scherz, 2011). Many principal preparation programs struggle to connect theoretical learning to real-life situations faced by principals (Oplatka, 2009).

Theoretical Framework: Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is a crucial role for assistant principals, especially since the passage of the No Child Left Behind law in 2001 (Gurley et. al., 2015). Increased accountability

demands at the state and federal level have led school principals to share instructional leadership responsibilities (Oleszewski et. al., 2012). Hallinger and Murphy (2013) stated, “there is substantial consensus of the importance of instructional leadership in efforts to raise and sustain the quality of teaching and learning in schools” (p.7). School improvement is rarely found without skillful instructional leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Oliver (2005) noted, “There is a dire need for assistant principals to participate in clearly defined and consistent professional development growth activities...to increase their instructional leadership skills” (p.90). This kind of training is essential for assistant principals aspiring to transition into the principal role. Some of this training may take place in a field-based activity or internship that affords the assistant principal an opportunity for hands-on learning experience in the field (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Lovely, 2004).

Assistant principals engaged in instructional tasks tend to describe their work more positively because they feel they are making a positive impact on their schools (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002). There is also a tangible benefit to exercising instructional leadership in schools. A meta-analysis of studies on instructional leadership by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that instructional leadership had a larger effect size on student outcomes than other forms of leadership. Further, their analysis suggested that there are substantial differences between the leadership of otherwise similar high and low performing schools and that those differences matter for student achievement.

One of the earliest conceptualizations of instructional leadership was offered by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). Their framework of instructional leadership was comprised of eight leadership functions and processes. These included: (1) framing and communicating school goals, (2) supervising and evaluating instruction, (3) coordinating curriculum, (4) enforcing

academic standards and expectations, (5) monitoring student progress, (6) promoting the professional development of teachers, (7) protecting instructional time, and (8) developing incentives for students and teachers.

More recently, Hallinger (2000) proposed that instructional leadership is comprised of three major dimensions: (1) defining the school's mission, (2) managing the instructional program, and (3) promoting a positive school-learning climate. The eight leadership functions and processes identified by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) can be categorized into these three dimensions. The following sections describe each of the eight instructional leadership functions and processes.

Framing and Communicating School Goals

The most influential avenue of leadership concerns the principal's role in shaping the school's mission (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). This particular leadership task involves the principal working with stakeholders to create a direction for the school. All other aspects of the school-instruction, curriculum, professional development, school climate-are shaped by the mission. In addition, Hallinger (2005) emphasizes the critical importance of setting and communicating a vision and mission in all organizations, including education.

Supervising and Evaluating Instruction

Assistant principals focused on instructional leadership spend time talking to teachers and observing instruction in their classrooms (Clayton et. al, 2014; Thompson, 2013). In reality, this part of an assistant principal's job is one of the most important. Instructional conversations with teachers can move schools in a positive direction (Clayton et. al., 2014, Glantz, 1994; Thompson, 2011). As assistant principals engage teachers in conversations about their instructional practices they often find opportunities to improve learning outcomes for students (Oleszewski et.

al., 2012; Sheng et. al., 2017; Thompson, 2011, 2013). In addition, as assistant principals monitor instruction they are able to determine if the school is moving toward its goals (Thompson, 2013).

Another part of evaluating instruction involves conducting performance evaluations with teachers. Assistant principals meet with teachers to discuss performance expectations for the year (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; 1986). Expectations are typically aligned with the school district's instructional personnel performance appraisal system. Assistant principals visit classrooms during the year to observe instruction and have coaching conversations about teachers' instructional practices (Thompson, 2013). Classroom visits and coaching conversations help assistant principals monitor the quality of instruction in the classroom and the expectations of the school.

Sun and Shoho (2017) surveyed a large sample of 568 assistant principals to gather their perspectives about the most important parts of their jobs related to school success in teaching and learning. They found "...observing classroom teaching, supervising and reviewing performance of teachers, and promoting a learning-centered focus were identified as the top responses by assistant principals" (p.481). This finding is consistent with other studies (Clayton et. al., 2014; Glantz, 1994; Sun, 2011) that point to assistant principals' awareness of the importance of supervising and evaluating instruction beyond the traditional role of managing students and the school building.

Coordinating Curriculum

Another characteristic of effective schools is a high degree of coordination in the school curriculum (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Assistant principals play a key role in working with teachers and departments to align school curriculum and materials to the state standards. They

also work with faculty to align curriculum across grade levels or courses (Hallinger, 2000; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Thompson, 2011). This may involve creating a guaranteed curriculum in each course so that all students are exposed to the same curriculum regardless of which teacher they are assigned (Dufour & Marzano, 2009). Assistant principals may also provide teachers with the training, support, resources, tools, and templates necessary to coordinate the curriculum and solve student learning issues (Dufour & Marzano, 2009).

Academic Standards and Expectations

The presence of high academic standards is yet another indicator of a successful school (Hallinger, 2000; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Assistant principals help to maintain high standards within a school by setting an expectation with teachers that course standards are taught within the school curriculum. Assistant principals can ensure that all courses within the school include rigorous standards by working directly with teachers to create a guaranteed curriculum. (Dufour & Marzano, 2009). Teachers often interpret course standards differently, assign different priorities to various standards, and follow different pacing. Assistant principals can support high standards across the school by supporting collaborative teams of teachers who work to hold high expectations for all students (Dufour & Marzano, 2009).

Monitoring Student Progress

Schools must have data in order to know if students are working toward proficiency on course standards. Often, these data come from formative assessments designed by school faculty. Formative assessments provide “just in time” data that can help teachers diagnose student learning issues. Teachers also administer summative assessments in the form of end of quarter tests, district assessments, and state and national assessments. Assistant principals help the school to monitor student progress by working with teachers to ensure that data about student

proficiency on course standards are captured on a regular basis (Clayton et. al., 2014; Hallinger, 2000; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Further, they can work with teachers to analyze the data, looking for trends, gaps in learning, and areas of success. Assistant principals use the data from assessments to evaluate instruction, have conversations with teachers, and set school goals for improvement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Thompson, 2011).

Professional Development

Related to instructional supervision is the role of the assistant principal in leading professional development for teachers (Thompson, 2013). Schools often have a professional development focus each year based on their needs. Assistant principals gather experience as instructional leaders by effectively leading professional learning (Oleszewski et. al., 2012; Sun, 2011). They can also accomplish this goal by participating in professional learning along with their teachers. Assistant principals who participate with a team of teachers during professional development send a powerful message about the importance of the training (Oleszewski et. al, 2012, Thompson, 2013). This training may take place as a whole school or in smaller learning communities.

Assistant principals can play a key role in working with teachers in professional learning communities (PLC). During these PLC meetings, assistant principals help teachers design a guaranteed curriculum for their students, create common assessments, analyze data, and solve student learning issues (Dufour & Marzano, 2009). This type of job-embedded professional development helps teachers grow as professionals and improves learning outcomes for students (Dufour & Marzano, 2009).

Protecting Instructional Time

This aspect of instructional leadership refers to limiting disruptions to the classroom environment (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Assistant principals can accomplish this goal in a variety of ways. They can limit disruptions from students by establishing and enforcing expectations for conduct. Disruptions caused by phone calls from the front office, or public address announcements during the period, can be alleviated by developing effective school policies. Assistant principals may also create instructional schedules that maximize the amount of learning time available to students. All of these actions can increase the amount of time teachers have to work with students and may improve their learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Incentives for Teachers and Students

Awards and financial incentives may encourage growth for both teachers and students. However, limited school budgets and restrictive teacher contracts make this a difficult strategy to implement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). A key strategy for assistant principals is the ability to form positive relationships with teachers and students (Peters & Pearce, 2012). Bulach, Pickett, and Boothe (1998) reported that the top predictor for administrator failure was the inability to form human relationships. Positive relationships facilitate student learning and teacher retention in schools (Peters & Pearce, 2012; Williams, 2012).

Opportunities for collaboration among teachers can also serve as an incentive. Schools with cultures that promote and support opportunities for teacher collaboration tend to have a more positive climate and culture than schools where teachers operate as sole proprietors (Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011). Collaboration provides an important support structure and facilitates professional learning opportunities for teachers. In addition,

collaboration provides opportunities for teachers to develop leadership capacity (Clayton, 2014; Parkes, 2007).

Assistant principals are uniquely positioned to develop leadership capacity in teachers so they can take on leadership tasks within a school (Hausman et. al., 2002). Sharing leadership within a school building is found repeatedly in the literature as a strategy for building culture and keeping momentum in the instructional program while the principal is engaged in non-instructional duties (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Horng et. al., 2010). Supportive assistant principals can also foster a climate of respect, recognition, and appreciation that increases teacher job satisfaction (Shen, Leslie, Spybrook, & Ma, 2012).

Barriers to Instructional Leadership

The literature consistently recognizes that, in reality, managerial duties dominate the time of assistant principals at the expense of opportunities to exercise instructional leadership (Armstrong, 2012; Clayton, 2014; Gurley et. al., 2015; Marshall & Greenfield, 1987; Oleszewski et. al., 2012; Oliver, 2005; Pellicer, Anderson, Keefe, Kelly & McCleary, 1988; Sun & Shoho, 2017). The many facets of an assistant principal's job can keep them from leading instruction effectively. The job of managing students and administering disciplinary consequences has traditionally been assigned to assistant principals (Williams, 2012). This task can be incredibly time consuming on a day to day basis. Processing discipline referrals, handling upset parents, managing investigations, and communicating with stakeholders often leaves little time for other leadership tasks. Glantz's (1994) study of assistant principals in New York found that the overwhelming majority of them wanted to spend more of their time on instructional tasks, but their time was often taken by managerial or discipline related duties.

Several studies reference the difficulties assistant principals have dealing with the unpredictable nature of their jobs (Craft, Malveaux, Lopez & Combs, 2016; Marshall & Greenfield, 1987; Oleszewski et. al., 2012). Well-planned days are often derailed by unexpected events. In some cases, it is an irate parent or a student disciplinary issue. Sometimes, unprofessional or unethical behavior of faculty or staff lead assistant principals off mission. Regardless of the reason, assistant principals quickly learn that they are not in control anymore; their time is not their own (Craft et. al., 2016). Unfortunately, many assistant principals spend their days dealing with one crisis after another instead of leading instruction. These duties outrank attending to the proactive goals of curriculum planning, instructional supervision, resource allocation, and professional development (Hausman et. al., 2012).

Some authors have contended that the position should be reconfigured to allow assistant principals more time during their day to focus on leadership tasks (Armstrong, 2012; Martinez, 2011; Oleszewski et. al., 2012). Studies have indicated that principals spend on average less than 20% of their time on instructional leadership activities (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010). Hallinger & Murphy (2013) suggest that there are three factors that bear on assistant principals who wish to practice instructional leadership: (1) expertise, (2) time, and (3) the normative environment of the school. The complexity of school curricula makes it very difficult for assistant principals to know everything to lead learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). In particular, the variety of subjects found in middle and high schools “require skill sets that typically go beyond those possessed by one individual in the school” (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013, p. 10). Time is also a huge factor as an assistant principal’s workday is often a series of conversations and crises to solve that are often initiated by others (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010). Finally, school systems give importance to managerial

tasks that take time away from opportunities to lead learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). In this context, principal preparation programs for assistant principals play an important role in learning how to maximize their time to engage in instructional leadership.

District Principal Preparation Programs for Assistant Principals

Despite the importance of principal preparation programs in developing instructional leadership (Drago-Severson & Aravena, 2011; Educational Research Service, 1998; Lovely, 2004; Marshall & Greenfield, 1987; Oliver, 2005), principal preparation programs received a significant amount of criticism in the mid-1980s for their low selection standards, irrelevant program content, and substandard performance requirements for students (Murphy, 1992; Herrington & Kearney, 2012). A recent systematic review of principal preparation programs conducted by the Wallace Foundation (2016) also reported that they have not consistently provided adequate preparation for the pressures and expectations of the principalship

Murphy (1992) argued administrators were not adequately prepared for the challenges facing them in an evolving education landscape. A study by Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, Collins, & McNeese (2016) of a principal preparation program at the University of Alabama examined assistant principal perceptions about the effectiveness of their program. Participants indicated that they experienced gaps in knowledge between classroom theory and real-world practice. They also struggled with emotional challenges in their efforts to meet the needs of students. Participants recognized a need for mentoring and continuing professional development to help them succeed in their jobs (Peters et. al., 2016). Lynch (2012) also noted that university-based “Principal preparation programs failed to prepare graduates for the role of instructional leader, especially regarding students with disabilities” (p. 40). The low retention rate of principals may be another indication that preparation programs need to better prepare future principals to face

various challenges on the job. O'Malley, Long, and King (2015) estimated that only about 50% of secondary principals remain on the job for three years. Worse, less than 30% of secondary principals remain for five years.

While there is an emerging consensus about the deficiencies in principal preparation programs, there is less agreement about new models to prepare today's school leaders. Most empirical studies have focused on university-based programs, whereas few studies have systematically evaluated district principal preparation programs for assistant principals (Cranston, 2008; Ford, Martin, Muth, & Steinbrecher, 1997; Hallinger & Bridges, 1997; Shaked & Schecter, 2017). Many current preparation programs combine theory with practice, using methods such as mentoring, induction, shadowing, reflection, and portfolio creation to help assistant principals learn the complexities of the principalship. There is a greater focus on preparing assistant principals to be instructional leaders rather than building managers (Wallace Foundation, 2016). This type of preparation is important for the realities an assistant principal may face once assuming leadership of a school.

Some large school districts in the State of Florida have created specific professional development programs for their own assistant principals. In south Florida, Miami-Dade County Public schools created an Assistant Principal Induction Academy to provide support to new assistant principals in their district. Their goal for this program is that "novice assistant principals will have a network of support as they lead their schools to heightened achievement, understand how their work connects to that of the district, and develop the skills necessary to efficiently recognize and improve teacher effectiveness" (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2014, para. 2).

In central Florida, Brevard County Public Schools created a leadership development program to support pre-service assistant principals and first and second year assistant principals. Their Leadership Academy is a prerequisite for individuals wishing to pursue appointment as an assistant principal within the district (Brevard Public Schools, 2017). First and second year assistant principals participate in Assistant Principal Academy Year 1 & 2. This program “builds on the foundational knowledge taught in the Leadership Academy, but with deeper content, more hands-on mentorship and ever-increasingly more difficult tasks” (Brevard Public Schools, 2017, p.5). Assistant principals who successfully complete the Assistant Principal Academy may apply to the district’s Level II Certification program to pursue their principal certification.

School districts in other states have begun to offer principal preparation programs for their assistant principals as well. The New York City Department of Education created the Advanced Leadership Program for assistant principals in 2005 in order to build capacity within the existing pool of assistant principals aspiring to the principalship (Drago-Severson & Aravena, 2011). This program was designed for assistant principals with two or more years of experience to grow from intensive leadership development (Drago-Severson & Aravena, 2011). The program consisted of leadership seminars with leading educators and authors, mentoring relationships with veteran principals in similar schools, networking and coaching relationships, and optional after-school sessions (Drago-Severson & Aravena, 2011).

In Kentucky, district principal preparation programs utilize university-district partnerships and are required to provide high quality field experiences to prepare assistant principals for school leadership (Dodson, 2014). Dodson’s (2014) study of the effectiveness of these field experiences surveyed nearly 300 public school principals in the state. Results suggested that principals felt real-world experiences with instructional leadership, group

collaboration, and data analysis were essential for quality leadership preparation. Despite these cases of district principal preparation programs, only a small number of studies have closely examined the effectiveness of programs for preparing school leaders through the perspectives and experiences of assistant principals.

Components of Principal Preparation Programs

Existing literature identified five major approaches used in principal preparation programs offered by school districts: (1) job shadowing, (2) mentoring, (3) induction, (4) portfolio writing, and (5) problem-based learning (PBL). In this section, I will describe each approach and synthesize research findings on the implementation and impacts of problem-based learning (PBL). Problem-based learning was the guiding principle of the Problem of Practice (PoP) project for supporting assistant principals' professional preparation to become a school principal.

Job Shadowing

Shadowing can be an important part of leadership succession planning because it provides assistant principals an opportunity to observe experienced administrators at work in their own schools (Peters-Hawkins, Reed, & Kingsberry, 2018). At its most basic level, shadowing involves following and observing the work of an individual as they conduct their business (Ferguson, 2016). In a school, this may mean observing an experienced administrator as he interacts with stakeholders, visits classrooms, or has instructional conversations with teachers. It may also involve observing more benign activities, such as working on district reports. Proximity to experienced administrators allows the learner to ask questions about how they approach specific job tasks (Ferguson, 2016).

Shadowing may help assistant principals develop their own interpersonal skills, such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution techniques (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012). Shadowing provides a valuable opportunity to observe veteran administrators work through difficult issues with various stakeholders. Observing how the veteran administrator handles these conversations may inform the learner's leadership practices. In addition, as assistant principals reflect on shadowing experiences they learn about gaps in their own professional knowledge (Barnett et. al., 2012).

Mentoring

The goal of mentoring is to develop and support people to learn their jobs in a non-threatening environment. "Mentoring provides a supporting learning relationship, enabling the protégé to move toward greater professional independence and, in many cases, interdependence between mentor and protégé" (Peters, 2010, p.112). Mentors may take several different roles depending on the needs of the protégé, including the mentor as coach, teacher, boss, parent, guide, peer, or adviser (Peters, 2010).

The notion of providing mentors to support the work of administrators is found repeatedly in the literature. Daresh (2007) notes, "the driving assumption has been that the most important goal of any principal mentoring program must be the assurance that the person being mentored will survive the first year or two on the job" (p. 21). Survival entails the newly-appointed principal's ability to carry out the various aspects of their job. Those responsibilities routinely include the school budget, personnel issues, community engagement, student discipline, coalition building, scheduling, and all of the other traditional tasks associated with effective performance (Daresh, 2007). Mentoring programs have to be structured to reflect the realities of the modern principal.

Mentors may support their protégé by listening and asking probing questions. They may also help them visualize success by focusing on process rather than an outcome. Sherman (2008) found that visualization techniques can be used in educational settings to help leaders see themselves working through difficult situations. Visualization, or mental rehearsal, is used with athletes as part of training to provide a competitive edge and increased awareness (Sherman, 2008). For new principals, visualization can assist with problem solving when the leader can imagine himself producing a positive result in a difficult situation. By focusing on the means, rather than the ends, the leader develops a sense of how to navigate the complex problems routinely encountered as a school principal (Sherman, 2008).

Mentoring creates a safe place for new principals to express how they relate to the demands of the job from a personal and professional perspective (Celoria & Robinson, 2015). The relationship formed between mentor and protégé allows conversations to occur with a sense of safety. These conversations provide a place for the protégé to confront insecurities when making difficult decisions (Celoria & Robinson, 2015). Mentoring can play a large role in the experience of feeling supported as an assistant principal transitions into the principal role (Boerema, 2011). Boerema (2011) explained that “Principals reported that an important element of support was being able to count on someone that was familiar with the principal’s situation that they could call on at any time” (p.561). Principals appreciated having a mentor who was familiar with the uniqueness of their situation.

Induction Programs

Beginning principals assume responsibility under overwhelming expectations as soon as they take on the leadership role (Ng, 2015). They have to try to meet the expectations of others while staying true to their own value systems (Ng, 2015). Studies indicate that beginning

principals need a supportive network of peers (Daresh, 2007). Beginning principals adjust better to their new role if they have a structured program that helps them balance professional demands.

In a study of 155 newly appointed principals in New Zealand, Brown and Chai (2012) examined the Self-Assessment of the Leadership of Teaching and Learning (SALTAL) induction program. It included 24 items organized into four dimensions and was designed to assess the capability of the new principal in the leadership of teaching and learning (Brown & Chai, 2012). Participants took the SALTAL self-evaluation tool three times over an 18-month period. Results indicated that the SALTAL tool was a statistically reliable inventory that could be used to measure the growth of new principals.

Some induction programs use leadership coaching as a strategy to help beginning principals develop. Coaching is more directive than mentoring, but it still focuses on improving leadership practice (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2008). Coaches typically draw on their own skills to help their client focus on issues and leadership challenges. Questioning skills are essential for coaches to help their client clarify goals and strategies to solve complex problems in their schools (Lochmiller, 2014). Confidentiality and trust between the coach and the client are also important, so that there is no fear of judgment or hesitation to ask questions or share concerns about important issues (Lochmiller, 2014).

Portfolio Writing

Portfolios are purposeful collections of work that exhibit the author's efforts, progress, and achievements (Chikoko, Naicker, & Mthiyane, 2011). They are commonly used to document achievements or proficiencies. Leadership development programs use portfolios for documentation of professional competence and have been found to be a useful learning and professional development tool (Orland-Barak, 2005; Tillmea & Smith, 2007). The process of

developing a portfolio involves collecting data and reflecting on its meaning and importance (Creseap, Peters, & Uline, 2005). Daloz (1999) identified guided reflection through administrative portfolio writing as one of four components necessary for transformational learning, along with the presence of a mentor, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action. Portfolios are the product of the learner and carry a record of their experiences during the time the portfolio was created. Chikoko et. al. (2011) added, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience” (p.321). Interaction with others and self-reflection lie at the heart of transformative learning (Daloz, 1999).

Creseap, Peters, & Uline (2005) investigated a leadership evaluation program known as the Administrative Leadership Academy: Entry Year Program (ALA-EYP) to determine the degree which ongoing reflection within the context of mentoring relationships and administrative portfolio writing supported the development of administrative leadership practice. Their two-year case study included three beginning principals and their mentors through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Findings suggested that beginning principals develop reflective habits over time through the use of portfolio writing and interactions with their mentor and become more confident in their own assessments of a situation (Creseap et. al., 2005). Furthermore, Creseap et. al. (2005) found that closely coached portfolio writing pushed beginning principals toward critical analysis of the link between process and results.

Problem Based Learning

Studies point to deficiencies in principal preparation programs in the connection between classroom theory and practical application (Duncan et. al., 2011; Herrington & Kearney, 2012; Murphy, 1992; Nir, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2016). Problem-based learning (PBL), or

learning by doing, is a professional development strategy that allows learners to play an active role in finding a solution for an issue in their local context (Bridges, 1989, 1992, 2012; Bridges & Hallinger, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999; Copland, 2000; Karabatak & Turhan, 2017; Thompson & Couto, 2016). This adult learning strategy is relatively new to principal preparation programs compared with its use in other fields.

Problem-based learning did not appear in the literature of principal preparation until 1989 even though the strategy had been used in medical and business management training since the 1960's (Bridges, 1989). The first comprehensive review of the literature on problem-based learning in principal preparation programs was published recently in 2017 (Hallinger & Bridges, 2017). Over the last 30 years, studies in problem-based learning for principal preparation have been largely based in qualitative and case study research (Hallinger & Bridges, 2017). Studies have largely been divided into investigations of university principal preparation programs and school district principal preparation programs. Nearly all of those studies have focused on the first year of program or university classroom implementation (Hallinger & Bridges, 2017). Only one university study (Barbour, 2006) extended investigation into a second year of program implementation. As a result, the literature offers little insight into how PBL translates to the practical realities of school leadership after an aspiring leader has become proficient in using the practice (Hallinger & Lu, 2011).

Bridges (1992) and Bridges and Hallinger (1993, 1995, 1997) state the goals of PBL include a change in capacity to lead collaboratively, ability to achieve results through others, learn independently, apply management skills, engage in reflective practice, acquire insight into the emotional aspects of leadership, and transfer new attitudes and skills to the local context.

Two major versions of PBL are prevalent in the literature, student-centered PBL and problem-stimulated PBL (Bridges & Hallinger, 1997). Both versions of PBL embody a constructivist approach to learning.

In student-centered PBL the problem is not presented with learning objectives and assigned readings. Learners generate their own learning goals and areas for further research after analyzing the problem itself. Learners are responsible for gathering the materials they need to address the problem (Bridges & Hallinger, 1997). In contrast, during problem-stimulated PBL the instructor provides the learning objectives and resources necessary to investigate the problem. Although different, student-centered PBL and problem-stimulated PBL share similar characteristics including that (1) problems form the starting point for learning, (2) learning is student centered rather than instructor driven, (3) learning occurs through collaboration in small groups, and (4) problems allow the student to develop skills that can be applied in their local context (Bridges, 1989, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger 1993, 1995, 1997; Copland, 2000; Ford, Martin, Muth, & Steinbrecher, 1997). Another similarity is that the problems presented in either version of PBL tend to take the form of cases, or educational scenarios, for learners to investigate (Cranston, 2008).

District Preparation Programs. Four studies examined the use of PBL in principal preparation programs at the school district level. Two studies examined programs for aspiring principals (Ford et. al., 1997; Shaked & Schecter, 2017), and two other studies examined programs for principals and district administrators (Cranston, 2008; Hallinger & Bridges, 1997).

The first study was conducted by Ford et. al. (1997) for the Denver Schools' Leadership Academy (DSLAs). This one-year intensive academy admitted 28 administrators who aspired to gain principal licensure. The assistant principals in the DSLAs were involved in problem-based

learning experiences that related to four domains in their licensing program. These included supervision of the curriculum, leadership of educational organizations, school improvement processes, and the school environment (Ford et. al., 1997). Assistant principals engaged in PBL through observation and shadowing at a district school site in each of the four domains. These experiences were combined with classroom instruction where assistant principals were given the opportunity to apply their learning from the field. In one instance, assistant principals examined a school improvement plan and worked in groups to develop recommendations to the school about how to improve the scope and presentation of the plan to the district. In another instance, assistant principals examined a school budget and its relationship to the school improvement plan of the previous assignment.

The results of the study suggested that DSLA participants believed the experiences offered through PBL stimulated critical thinking about educational issues (Ford et. al., 1997). Assistant principals also indicated that exposure to PBL experiences were the most helpful for learning because they allowed for active involvement in the learning process (Ford et. al., 1997). The researchers found that 50% of the assistant principals in the cohort had made upward career moves within one year of completing the DSLA.

The second study was conducted by Cranston (2008) for the Department of Education in Queensland, Australia. Cranston's leadership framework was designed around five leadership capabilities for principals, including professional knowledge, professional and ethical practices, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and decision-making, and organizational skills. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the implementation of PBL as a new instructional strategy in the district's principal preparation program. The researchers conducted four workshops for

this purpose. Each workshop ranged in size from 10 to 15 participants in a combination of school principals and district personnel.

During the workshops, Cranston's (2008) participants engaged in a PBL activity structured as a case study. The case studies represented actual scenarios faced by principals in the school district. Participants read a summary of the case and background information about the school. Next, participants worked in small groups using provided focus questions to engage in discussion about the case. Finally, participants were asked to link their learning to the leadership framework and identify specific areas for their own professional development. Twenty-three of 45 participants involved in the study subsequently completed a questionnaire about the workshops. Results indicated that 78% of workshop participants felt that PBL would be very effective in the leadership development of aspiring principals (Cranston, 2008). Further, participants felt that their engagement with the PBL cases in the workshops provided opportunities to engage in authentic, "real world" training that connected theory to practice (Cranston, 2008).

The most recent study of district principal preparation programs was conducted by Shaked and Schechter (2017) for the Capstone Institute in Israel. Their study explored the integration of learning from problems (LFP) and learning from successes (LFS) as a collaborative learning framework for aspiring principals with a focus on problems as their central feature. Shaked and Schechter (2017) defined learning from successes as "collaborative inquiry into aspiring principals' successful practices to uncover the implicit wisdom that made their success possible" (p. 88). The study was comprised of 24 aspiring principals spread across five of Israel's six school districts.

Participants engaged in PBL by identifying a problematic or successful experience from their jobs and providing a concise description to the group. Next, participants reconstructed the specific actions that led to resolution of their job-embedded experience. Participants identified important turning points in their experience to the group and created principles of action based on the work they had performed to resolve the job-embedded issue. Finally, participants noted unresolved issues from their job-embedded experience for further inquiry (Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Results of the study suggested that the integration of learning from problems and learning from successes had three benefits. First, the integration of the two approaches provided a more holistic view of a problem since participants examined what went well in addition to the shortcomings (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). Second, participants felt that they were better able to identify and possibly replicate successful leadership practices by including LFS. Finally, participants felt they were able to draw conclusions about their problems more positively when learning from successes was combined with learning from problems (Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Hallinger and Bridges (1997) conducted training for district staff involved in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin professional development institute for school principals. The purpose of their work was to introduce district professional development staff to the use of PBL in the preparation of urban school principals. School districts that utilize a systematic leadership curriculum to integrate knowledge and skill development over time have the most potential for incorporating PBL activities (Hallinger & Bridges, 1997).

Participants were divided into small groups and given a realistic problem concerning a department budget. Each participant assumed the role of department members in order to solve

the budget issue. Participants used video and text resources during the activity that had been selected by their instructor in order to gain knowledge about the budget problem presented to them. At the end of the institute, participants delivered a group report that provided recommendations about how to resolve the budget problem facing the department (Hallinger & Bridges, 1997).

Hallinger and Bridges (1997) found that there was a trade-off in content coverage when using PBL versus traditional instructional methods. Instructors typically were only able to address about 80% of the content covered by their traditional curriculum (Hallinger & Bridges, 1997). However, the design of PBL may have allowed learners to assimilate the content and develop self-directed learning skills more easily since they were learning for understanding and not simply covering content in their courses (Hallinger & Bridges, 1997). Further, the researchers believed that the use of PBL could develop the affective capacities of aspiring leaders (Hallinger & Bridges, 1997). The collaborative work of PBL allowed learners to work with and through other people just as they would as a leader in a school. It also allowed them to experience a wide range of emotions as they worked through the problem presented.

These four studies on the use of PBL in district preparation programs presented several key findings. In every study, participants worked in small groups on one or more parts of their PBL activity. The interaction of these small groups allowed participants the opportunity for investigation and discussion of the central topics of the PBL activities presented to them. The content of PBL activities were drawn from personal experiences, shadowing or observation of principals in the field, or from instructor developed case studies. All of the topics chosen for the PBL activities in these studies were drawn from real-world experiences an aspiring principal might face in a school setting.

University Preparation Programs. The following section synthesizes studies on PBL in university preparation programs due to the limited number of studies on the use of PBL in district principal preparation programs. While the PBL techniques utilized in university and district principal preparation programs are similar, the studies on district principal preparation did not provide details on the challenges of implementing a PBL curriculum. In addition, none of the district studies focused on specific learning outcomes for assistant principals such as problem identification. The university studies synthesized in this section provide information related to the PoP project that is the focus of this study, namely identification of a PoP project topic, development of a focus question, implementation challenges, and implementation challenges and variations.

Hallinger and Bridges (2007) explain that university programs that use a PBL approach see learning as more functional where each experience contributes to the assimilation of knowledge for an aspiring principal. However, some university principal preparation programs have found PBL challenging to implement and plan because the schedule of lessons is not straightforward due to the nature of student-directed learning (Edens, 2000). PBL also requires staff training to be used effectively with students.

Partially in response to this concern, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) conceived a web-driven problem-based learning platform as an alternative instructional strategy for graduate students in educational administration (Mayer, Musser, & Remidez, 2002). Two subsequent studies into web-based PBL (Karabatak & Turhan, 2017; Mayer, Musser, & Remidez, 2002) found that this approach may enrich learning opportunities for aspiring principals. Web-based PBL provides authentic learning experiences through information technology in which learners can explore real-world problems through a

variety of collaboration, productivity, and knowledge creation tools (Mayer, Musser, & Remidez, 2002). Web-based PBL may also increase an aspiring principal's self-efficacy (Karabatak & Turhan, 2017) in his or her ability to lead a school.

The literature on PBL suggests that problem-based learning may improve the leadership skills of aspiring principals in university principal preparation programs (Bridges, 1989; Bridges and Hallinger, 1993, 1995; Hallinger & Bridges, 2007; Copland, 2000). The skills of identifying and framing a problem and understanding the importance of the problem in the learner's local context can be developed through exposure to problem-based learning (Copland, 2000; Edens, 2000). Copland (2000) investigated three successive cohorts of aspiring principals who had been exposed to PBL in their university preparation program. The purpose of his study was to determine how PBL affected the ability of learners to frame problems, a key skill for school principals. He found that each successive cohort had a greater ability to frame problems and to identify possible solutions that could be used to solve the problem (Copland, 2000).

Problem-based learning may also support critical thinking and collaboration skills among administrators who use it as part of their preparation for the principalship (Akin, 2010; Griswold, 2006; Hallinger & Bridges, 2007; Karabatak & Turhan, 2017; Tanner, Keedy, & Galls, 1995). Barbour's (2006) study of the use of PBL in university principal preparation programs involved observations of four groups of graduate students over two years as they worked through PBL activities. Barbour (2006) found that PBL activities were effective in developing teamwork among the students in the study due to the collaborative nature of the work. Further, Barbour (2006) found that PBL was well-suited to developing students' capacity for leading others.

A study conducted by Tanner et. al. (1995) at the University of Georgia into the use of PBL in principal preparation programs utilized a curriculum of 30% lecture and discussion and

70% PBL activities. Results suggested that PBL narrowed the gap between the experience of the learner and that of a school principal. Griswold's (2006) study supported this finding. His investigation of the use of PBL with 15 graduate students in a university-district partnership suggested that engaging in PBL activities helped students learn in an authentic manner how to work collaboratively, delegate responsibility, and clearly frame problems with appropriate questions (Griswold, 2006).

Problem-based learning also appears to promote higher levels of engagement in aspiring principals than the traditional strategies typically found in leadership development programs (Copland, 2000; Cranston, 2008; Edens, 2000; Hallinger & Kantamara, 2001; Thompson & Couto, 2016). This is generally attributed to learners working on problems of interest inside their local context. Hallinger and Bridges (2017) note, "motivation appeared to be stimulated by the challenge of solving real problems under time constraints, needing to develop "products" that would be presented to relevant audiences, and the positive pressure that came from working collaboratively in a team" (p. 272). These findings seem to hold true even in non-western countries. A study by Walker, Bridges, and Chan (1996) found that motivation and learner engagement among Chinese students involved in PBL assignments in their educational administration courses was very similar to students in western countries.

Although the majority of learners seem to enjoy problem-based learning, broader studies on PBL outside of principal preparation found that learners tend to struggle with the lack of structure often found in PBL assignments (Edens, 2000; Limerick, Clarke, & Daws, 1997). The self-directed nature of PBL provides students with many options for investigation of a problem and development of possible solutions. At the same time, learners in multiple studies felt the lack of direction, limited timelines for project completion, and lack of clear understanding of

project goals created anxiety and stress (Bridges, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Edens, 2000; Limerick et. al., 1997). Learners saw these factors as a weakness of problem-based learning.

In summary, the literature on the use of PBL in university principal preparation programs suggests that PBL can help aspiring principals better understand how to identify and frame problems in their local context. This is a key aspect of the PoP project examined for this study, as assistant principals must accurately frame their problem and create a focus question in order to develop possible solutions. In addition, the use of PBL activities promotes collaboration among learners as they examine possible solutions to problems. In the PoP project, this collaborative nature is illustrated by the interactions between the assistant principal and their Level II committee. PBL activities in the university setting also seem to support a higher level of learner engagement as learners are often working on problems that are relevant to them. In the case of the PoP project, the assistant principals identify a relevant problem in their local context and work collaboratively to develop a solution to resolve it. Finally, the literature suggests that while PBL activities are effective at developing leadership capacity, learners sometimes struggle with the self-directed nature of the work.

The problem of practice project embedded in the Level II Certification program provides a valuable opportunity for assistant principals to gain practical experience with instructional leadership tasks. The use of PBL in the Level II Certification program allows assistant principals to develop strategic thinking and capacity for solving problems encountered at the principal level. These experiences may help to prepare assistant principals to develop solutions to problems they will encounter when they assume leadership of their own school.

Level II Certification Program in Brevard Public Schools

The new Level II Certification program approved by the School Board of Brevard County is designed to provide training, mentorship, job-embedded learning and leadership development opportunities to assistant principals. This two-year program focuses on developing assistant principals to become instructional leaders.

Program Goals and Admission Criteria

The School Board of Brevard County (2017) states the goals of the program are to:

1. Transform school learning environments in ways that ensure all students will graduate college and career ready.
2. Craft, in cooperation with key stakeholders, the school's vision, mission, and strategic goals to focus on and support high levels of learning for all students and high expectations for all members of the school community.
3. Lead others in using performance outcomes and other data to strategically align people, time, funding, and school processes to continually improve student achievement and growth.
4. Nurture and sustain a positive climate and safe school environment for all stakeholders.
5. Develop, implement, and refine processes to select, induct, support, evaluate, and retain quality personnel to serve in instructional and support roles.
6. Nurture and support professional growth in others and appropriately share leadership responsibilities.
7. Recognize that schools are an integral part of the community.

These goals are well-aligned with its central focus on instructional leadership for supporting and promoting effective teaching and student learning. The Office of Professional

Learning and Development for the School Board of Brevard County is responsible for administering the Level II Certification program. The program is selective and requires candidates to have completed several steps to qualify for admission. These steps include verification of completion of the Assistant Principal Academy, three years of teaching experience, and a valid Florida leadership certificate, two years of effective or highly effective performance appraisals in an administrative role including satisfactory performance on instructional leadership responsibilities, and a response to a problem of practice scenario based on the Florida Principal Leadership Standards. Based on these criteria, six assistant principals were accepted into the Level II Certification program that started in Spring 2018.

Program Components

The first step for the assistant principals admitted to the program is to form a committee to help guide them through the required components. As a group, these individuals form the assistant principal's Level II Certification committee. The committee includes the assistant principal's supervising principal, a mentor principal selected by the assistant principal, a district-level director for elementary or secondary schools, and a veteran principal. Each committee member invests time and expertise to ensure the assistant principal attains proficiency on the Florida Principal Leadership Standards. Assistant principals are responsible for scheduling a meeting with their committee once per quarter. The assistant principal creates the meeting agenda and facilitates the discussion. Once the committee is formed, assistant principals take a pre-assessment of their proficiency on the Florida Principal Leadership Standards so that committee members can help them develop an individualized learning plan. As stated above, the program contains five different components: (1) reflection on learning, (2) professional

development courses, (3) six shadowing experiences with reflection, (4) program committee's summative review of the candidate, and (5) completion of a problem-of-practice (PoP) project.

The first component of the program requires assistant principals to summarize their learning in eight different situations that arise to the level of a priority within the daily functions of a school principal. These are called Priority Responses (Brevard Public Schools, 2017). This reflection activity requires the assistant principal to demonstrate sound, reasoned decision making and critical thinking (Brevard Public Schools, 2017). The situations used for this activity must be outside the normal job responsibilities of a quality assistant principal.

The second component is professional development. Ten courses are required for program completion. The committees identify six courses that would benefit the assistant principals based on their unique experiences and knowledge gaps. These six courses may include state workshops or conferences related specifically to school leadership or curriculum development. Four other district courses are mandatory. These are divided into different categories labeled "Accountability Series," "Education for All Series," "Learning Priorities Series," and "Human Resources Series." Accountability covers topics such as school finance, payroll, and budgeting. Education for All offers training on students with disabilities, multi-tiered system of services (MTSS), and English as a second language (ESOL). Learning Priorities focuses on standards-based instruction, learner engagement, continuous improvement, and professional learning communities (PLC). Finally, Human Resources teaches assistant principals about hiring, the teacher contract, and personnel issues (Brevard Public Schools, 2017).

The third component is shadowing experiences. Level II Certification requires six shadowing experiences. As a group the experiences should represent a diverse, well-rounded selection of schools and principals to include elementary, middle, high schools, and Title I

schools (Brevard Public Schools, 2017). Shadowing experiences are focused around the Wallace Foundation's "*The Making of the Principal: Five Lessons in Leadership Training*." Assistant Principals are expected to observe how the principals they shadow shape a vision of academic success for all students, create a positive learning environment, cultivate leadership in others, improve instruction, and manage people, data, and processes (Brevard Public Schools, 2017). Shadowing experiences include a reflection component where the assistant principal summarizes the visit and the standards covered.

The fourth component of Level II Certification is known as a 360-degree review. This review is an opportunity for the assistant principal's committee to complete a formative review of the learning and growth shown by the assistant principal throughout the program (Brevard Public Schools, 2017). The purpose of the review is for the assistant principal to learn how their committee perceives their growth and to discuss strengths and weakness. For the committee, it is an opportunity to provide feedback for growth and to reinforce that the program is a process of learning and not merely a compliance exercise. Reviews are completed by the committee prior to the third quarter of each school year the candidate is in the program. Results of these 360-degree reviews allow the committee to determine possible knowledge gaps and discuss a course of action with the candidate.

The PoP project comprises the final component of Level II Certification. Assistant principals are required to complete two of these activities over the two years of the program. These problems tend to be difficult and challenging. For example, a relevant PoP project might include raising reading scores for the lowest 25% of students, or a subgroup of students. Each PoP project must focus on an initiative within the district's strategic plan. At the elementary level, assistant principals are required to work on early childhood literacy. Middle school

assistant principals are required to focus on increasing students' proficiency in Algebra I. Senior high school assistant principals are required to address problems of practice around graduation rate and/or college and career readiness. Problems should be both directly observable and actionable (Brevard Public Schools, 2017) within the school year they are initiated. Assistant principals begin each problem by determining their own school's progress toward the initiative on the strategic plan. Next, they work with their committee to create a focus question to guide them and a plan of action to follow. The focus question drives collaborative discussion between the committee and the assistant principal as he or she works to address the problem in question. The action plan is designed to help the assistant principal with implementation of a solution to the problem.

As a new program, district leaders of Brevard Public Schools require information about the Level II Certification program to determine if it is meeting its goals. The program is too young to determine program outcomes at this time. However, district leaders are specifically interested in measuring the growth of assistant principals in the program as they complete the various job-embedded tasks. They are also interested in learning about how assistant principals' implement their PoP projects. This study focuses on the PoP project to explore how it was introduced by the district and implemented by assistant principals in their own schools. By investigating how assistant principals engaged in this project by identifying specific problems of practice within their own context, developing a focus question, and designing and implementing a plan of action, the researcher identified challenges associated with implementing a PoP project. The researcher also explored different approaches taken by assistant principals in implementing their action plan and the contexts that explained the differences.

Summary

The assistant principalship is a key position within a school, but one that has been traditionally relegated to managerial roles. Principals often assign their assistants to handle student discipline, manage schedules, perform supervision, and deal with parents. These activities make it difficult for an assistant principal to gain experience with instructional leadership. The expectations created by state and federal accountability have increased the pressure on schools to improve student achievement. Researchers have called for school districts to redefine the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals so that they focus more of their time on instructional tasks. Further, studies indicate that professional development for assistant principals should provide training for instructional tasks.

Principal preparation programs for assistant principals are evolving to combine theory and real-world experiences. Assistant principals require an extensive amount of training in order to be prepared to meet the expectations of the principalship. Instructional leadership is consistently identified as one of the most important roles of the school principal. There is some consensus about the deficiencies in principal preparation programs. However, the literature does not indicate that any model of principal preparation is clearly superior to others. Different forms of principal preparation have been presented repeatedly in published studies. These include the importance of induction programs, the purposes and effects of mentoring, the reflective nature of portfolio writing, problem-based learning, and central office involvement in principal preparation. The current study examines one approach to problem-based learning, the PoP project to be implemented in the Level II Certification Program in Brevard County Schools.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine one component of the Level II Certification Program for assistant principals, the Problem of Practice (PoP) project offered by Brevard County Public Schools. These PoP project topics are directly connected to district Strategic Plan goals in early childhood literacy for elementary schools, Algebra I proficiency for middle schools, and college and career readiness and graduation rate for high schools. Problem-based learning offers program participants an opportunity to practice instructional leadership on issues within their own school.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do assistant principals in the Level II Certification program identify specific problems of practice, develop focus questions, and create a plan of action to follow in a Problem of Practice (PoP) project?
2. How do assistant principals implement their plan of action in the PoP project?
3. What explains the differences in assistant principals' implementation of their action plans as instructional leaders?

Research Design

A qualitative case study was the method of inquiry selected for this study. Case study is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores a program, event, activity, or process in depth (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative inquiry was selected for this study in order to investigate assistant principals' experience and perspectives regarding the PoP project as they identify

specific problems of practice, develop a focus question, and create and implement a plan of action.

Qualitative data consist of quotations from interviews, observations, excerpts from documents, and entries from social media (Patton, 2015). There are multiple ways to collect qualitative data, but much of it involves going into the field to participants' natural settings (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2015). Qualitative data often bring rich description of events to light so that the reader can better understand the context and meaning to the participant. Qualitative inquiry requires the researcher to get personally engaged in the context of the participant (Patton, 2015).

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because there has been only a small number of studies conducted about the problem-based learning component of the Level II Certification program in a district setting (Creswell, 2003). The research questions for the study focused on the participants' individual experiences and perspectives with their own PoP project. Qualitative methods are well-suited to capture individual experiences and perceptions within the Level II Certification Program.

Study Site

This study was conducted in the Brevard Public School district using a qualitative case study design where I work as a school principal. This context is especially important for an investigation of principal preparation because of the large number of new principals hired for the 2017-18 school year. There were fourteen new principals appointed out of 82 schools. In addition, there were four secondary principals and four elementary principals hired for the 2018-2019 school year. The amount of attrition at the principal level created pressure for the district to

prepare assistant principals for school leadership. The Level II Certification program used by the district was revised in 2017 and implemented since spring 2018 specifically to meet this need.

The district selected was one of the ten largest in the state of Florida. There were 82 public schools within the district: twelve high schools, eleven middle schools, four junior/senior high schools, and 55 elementary schools. In addition, the district had 20 special centers and ten charter schools. It served approximately 75,000 students in grades kindergarten through twelve and employed nearly 9,000 staff members. Student enrollment for elementary schools ranged from approximately 300 to 1,000 students. Middle schools had enrollments ranging from 450 to 1,100 students. High School student enrollment ranged from 1,100 to 2,200 students.

Demographics for the 2017-18 school year were 67% White, 14.4% African-American, 8.5% Hispanic, 2.2% Asian, and 0.3% American Indian. Approximately 53% of the students within the district were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Forty-one of the district's 55 elementary schools, and one secondary school, received federal funding through Title I. This represented 51.2% of the total number of public schools in the district.

The majority of elementary schools in the district had one principal on a twelve-month contract and one assistant principal on a ten-month contract. Middle schools served students in grades 7-8. Ten of the eleven middle schools were staffed with one principal on a twelve-month contract, one assistant principal on a twelve-month contract, and one assistant principal on a ten-month contract. One middle school had an additional ten-month assistant principal because of their large student enrollment. The junior/senior high schools served students in grades 7-12. Two of these schools were designated as schools of choice and required an application process in order to be selected for admission. The remaining junior/senior high schools used the grade 7-12 configuration in order to efficiently utilize available building space. The district's high schools

served students in grades 9-12. Administrative staffing consisted of one principal, two assistant principals on a twelve-month contract, and up to three assistant principals on a ten-month contract.

Recruitment and Access

I was employed by Brevard Public Schools as a high school principal during the time period in which the study was conducted. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from Florida State University's institutional review board (IRB). Local approval was obtained from the school district's IRB committee. I obtained a list of assistant principals selected to participate in the Level II Certification program from the district Office of Professional Learning & Development. None of these six assistant principals were employed at my school. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to those individuals. I was invited in August 2018 by the district Director of Professional Learning and Development to meet the Level II Certification program participants. Snacks were provided prior to the meeting for the participants. I spent that time mingling and talking with each participant to introduce himself and establish rapport. The meeting began with introductions where each participant shared information about their current leadership assignment and their progress thus far in the Level II Certification program. The Director of Professional Learning and Development then explained the purpose of the PoP project and briefly described the various components. After her presentation, I was invited to explain the purpose of his study. The participants were provided the opportunity to ask me questions about the study. I provided informed consent forms to each participant during this meeting. No incentives were offered for participation in the study. Each of the participants agreed to participate in the study and to allow me to collect data on their school campus during non-instructional time.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two semi-structured interviews with each assistant principal, documents provided by the school district and assistant principals regarding the PoP project, and observations of the PoP training meeting and individual committee meetings. The first interviews were conducted between September and October 2018 and were focused specifically on the first research question (Appendix A). The second interviews were conducted at the end of April 2019 and were focused on research questions two and three (Appendix B). The separation of the two interviews allowed time for the participants to work through their PoP project with their committee and make progress in the project.

The first and second interviews used a different set of questions designed to help answer the research questions for the study. The same interview questions were used with each participant. The first interviews were conducted with participants on their campuses during non-instructional time. In each case, these interviews were conducted one on one in a conference room at the participants' schools. These rooms were comfortable, well lit, and free from distraction. Almost all of the second interviews were conducted in a similar fashion. However, two of the second interviews were conducted at the district offices of the School Board of Brevard County when two of the participants and I happened to be there for training on the same day. In total, this study yielded twelve semi-structured interviews with participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent on my Apple iPad. Just Press Record software on the iPad captured each interview and transcribed the information into a written transcript for analysis. Data on the iPad were password protected so that I was the only

person with access to the device. The iPad was stored in a locked office in the researcher's home for the duration of the study.

In addition to interviews, documents from each participants' Level II Certification program were collected. Principal candidates in the Level II Certification program were required to create a substantial portfolio that documented their proficiency in the Florida Principal Leadership Standards. These portfolios included documentation on ten professional development courses, six shadowing experiences, eight priority responses, two problems of practice, plus a 360-degree self-assessment from the participant's Level II committee. For the purpose of this study, only documents specifically related to participants' problem of practice were collected for data analysis. Data included minutes from Level II Certification committee meetings, meeting agendas, focus questions, implementation plans, progress monitoring documents, and outcomes for the problem of practice selected by participants.

Observations formed the last piece of data collected for this study. I observed the PoP project training that occurred in August 2018. I also attended Level II Certification committee meetings in which the participants' PoP projects were discussed. I took field notes during each observation in a Microsoft Word document. Field notes contained the setting, meeting participant's names, observations about interactions between meeting participants, as well as direct quotes taken from their discussions. The field notes captured the interactions between each participant and their Level II committee members as they discussed the identification of a PoP project topic, focus questions, and possible action steps. I did not speak to any of the committee members, or speak up to join the conversation, until the meetings were adjourned. Committee meetings were held at participants' schools in comfortable conference rooms.

Data Analysis

Each piece of data for the study was reviewed individually as it was collected and then holistically once data collection had concluded. I reviewed field notes and artifacts immediately after each Level II committee meeting and identified the portions that contained information about the various components of the PoP projects. The field notes and artifacts were reviewed a second time after the interviews were concluded as part of a holistic review.

There were several months of separation between the first and second interviews with the participants. Once the first round of interviews were completed, I listened to the audio recordings and read the interview transcripts. The process was repeated a second time to ensure accuracy in the interview transcripts. I utilized the same process several months later when the second interviews were conducted. This process, combined with member checking by sharing the interview transcripts with the participants, ensured that the data collected during participant interviews captured their experiences as accurately as possible. Once all of the interviews had been conducted, I reviewed all of the data holistically looking specifically for similarities and differences in the experiences of the participants.

After review, each document was loaded into the Dedoose software. I used the Dedoose software to openly code the data from each document. Pre-determined codes were used to identify information in the data related to the prominent components of the PoP projects, such as problem identification, focus question, and action plan implementation. After multiple rounds of coding, the information was reviewed thoroughly in order to identify themes in the data. Themes related to the challenges experienced by the assistant principals during implementation of their PoP projects were identified. I also identified themes in the data related to the nature of action plan implementation by two assistant principals who completed all components of their PoP

project. The multiple rounds of coding, review of the data for thematic statements, and consultation with my faculty advisor provide confidence that the themes that emerged were the best representations of the experiences of the assistant principals in this study.

Validity and Reliability

In order to ensure internal validity, the interview protocols were developed based on the instructional leadership framework used in this study. Interview questions about instructional leadership were based on Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) eight leadership functions. A combination of data triangulation from artifacts, semi-structured interviews, and observations were combined with member checking to verify the findings from this study. Transcripts from interviews and observations were shared with participants to ensure accuracy of the data collected. Questions about participants' responses were checked directly with them during the data analysis process. This ensured that the data precisely captured the intent of the participant.

Role of the Researcher and Subjectivity

My role in this study was to collect data from the assistant principals in the Level II Certification program to explore their experiences and perspectives regarding the implementation of their PoP project. My position as a senior high school principal provided a unique perspective on the daily responsibilities and challenges of assistant principals as they exercised instructional leadership. In addition, my position and tenure within the school district in which the study was conducted provided intimate knowledge of district policies and procedures. I had personal and professional relationships with many of the administrators within the school district. These relationships provided me with a more relaxed interview environment in which the subjects and I shared some familiarity.

At the same time, my tenure, position, and previous training within the school district made it more likely for bias to be present in the research conducted for this study. I am an experienced instructional leader who was trained under the previous building level principal preparation program used in the district. I believe instructional leadership is one of the most important roles an assistant principal must learn to be an effective school leader. To minimize potential bias in data collection and interpretation, I maintained a consistent focus on the theoretical framework and PBL literature that guided the analysis. I also sought out negative instances to counter all major findings and took advantage of the diverse perspectives of my advisor to receive feedback and invite alternative interpretations of the data.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

This study investigated a single component of the Level II Certification program of the Brevard Public School district, the Problem of Practice (PoP) project. The PoP project was a key component of the new Level II Certification program of the school district because it provided a connection between leadership theory and the everyday life of a school principal (Duncan et. al., 2011; Herrington & Kearney, 2012; Murphy, 1992; Nir, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2016). The PoP projects were designed to provide assistant principals with an opportunity to investigate and solve complex problems in their own schools.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the PoP project was implemented by the six assistant principals who participated in the Level II Certification program. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do assistant principals in the Level II Certification program identify specific problems of practice, develop focus questions, and create a plan of action to follow in a Problem of Practice (PoP) project?
2. How do assistant principals implement their plan of action in the PoP project?
3. What explains the differences in assistant principals' implementation of their action plans as instructional leaders?

This chapter presents research findings gathered from a series of semi-structured interviews with each assistant principal in the Level II Certification program, artifacts from each PoP project, and observations from field notes collected during Level II program meetings. This chapter begins by introducing the background and experience of the six study participants. This

is followed by addressing the findings related to the three research questions. In addressing the first research question, the data revealed that all participants experienced major challenges with the implementation of the PoP project. All six participants were able to identify a problem of practice and develop a focus question. However, only four participants were able to develop and implement an action plan. Their challenges are explained in detail. For the second and third research questions, data from two cases that illustrate contrasting approaches to action plan implementation are presented. These two cases came from two high school assistant principals who chose the same goal of improving the graduation rate at their schools to guide their action plans. The differences in their approaches are explained for the second research question. The possible reasons that were found in the data to explain their differences are discussed for the third research question.

Participant Background and Experience

The Level II Certification Program required participants to have at least three years of teaching experience and two years of experience as an assistant principal or district-level equivalent. A total of six assistant principals were admitted to the Level II Certification Program in spring 2018. The researcher obtained a list of these individuals from the district Office of Professional Learning and Development and invited each of them to join the study. All of the participants in the study were white females. Two participants were elementary school assistant principals, one was a middle school assistant principal, and three were high school assistant principals. The participants had a combined total of 57 years of teaching experience, or an average of 9.5 years of teaching experience each. They had 19 years of administrative experience combined, or an average of 3.12 years of administrative experience each (Table 4-1).

All of the participants had worked in their administrative positions for at least two years at the time of the study.

Table 4-1: Participant Experience and School Background

Name	Teaching Experience	Administrative Experience	School Level	Enrollment	Poverty Level
Susan	8 years	3 years	Elementary	401-600	61-80%
Pamela	12 years	3 years	Elementary	601-800	1-20%
Jane	13 years	3 years	Middle	401-600	41-60%
Amanda	9 years	3 years	High	1401-1600	21-40%
Stephanie	10 years	3 years	High	2101-2300	1-20%
Jaime	12 years	4 years	High	1201-1400	41-60%
Total	57 years	19 years			
Average	9.5 years	3.12 years			

Susan²

Susan taught for several years at elementary and charter schools. She served as a lead writing teacher at her charter school prior to becoming a Title I coordinator at a low-income, low-performing district elementary school. Susan was involved in many aspects of school planning and operations in her role as a Title I writing coordinator and felt that experience had given her good preparation for school leadership. At the time of the study, Susan was working as an assistant principal at a Title I elementary school. The student population was average size

² Pseudonyms were used for all names to avoid participant identification.

for the school district. Her school had earned B grades over the last three years in the state accountability system. The student population was not considered diverse by district standards, with less than half of the study body listed as African-American or Hispanic. Susan was motivated by her prior leadership experiences to apply for the Level II program. Susan described her leadership style as strategic. She enjoyed thinking through problems and working with data to identify needs in her school. Susan's PoP project was focused on improving reading proficiency for her fifth-grade students.

Pamela

Pamela was one of the more experienced participants in the study, with over ten years of teaching experience at the elementary and high school levels. Pamela had worked as a reading coach at the high school level for five years prior to her appointment as an elementary assistant principal. She was in this same administrative job at the time of the study. Pamela's school was considered one of the more affluent schools in the district and had earned an A grade for the past several years in the state accountability system. Pamela was very motivated by her role as a reading coach to pursue school leadership and credited that experience as her motivation to apply to the Level II program. Pamela enjoyed working collaboratively with the teachers in her school and felt that a close relationship between administration and the faculty helped her accomplish school goals. Her PoP project focused on improving writing proficiency for her third-grade students.

Jane

Jane was the sole middle school administrator in the study. Her school was located a mostly rural, lower-income area of the school district. Her school's academic performance hovered between A and B grades in the state accountability system over the last three years.

Jane was a very experienced middle school teacher and administrator. She had taught math for 13 years at the middle school level prior to moving into a guidance services professional (GSP) role. The GSP position provided Jane access to duties outside the regular classroom and exposure to tasks typically assumed by school administrators. Prior to her selection for the Level II program, Jane had attained extensive experience with student scheduling, running data reports, parent communication, school-wide test coordination, and data analysis. Jane felt her inspiration to become a school principal had come from some of the training programs offered to assistant principals in the school district. Jane had a gregarious personality and felt that personal relationships were the key to her leadership. Her PoP project was focused on improving Algebra I proficiency for the students in her school.

Amanda

Amanda had spent most of her career working as an elementary teacher prior to one year as a middle school guidance services professional. She worked for two years as an elementary school assistant principal and had gained experience with many aspects of instructional and operational leadership prior to her selection in the Level II program. At the time of the study, Amanda had just been promoted to a high school assistant principal position. Her school had earned a B grade in the state accountability system over the prior three years. Amanda had been inspired by her most recent elementary school principal to enter the Level II program and train to become a school principal. Amanda believed that it was her responsibility to lead by example in her school. She would not ask her teachers to do something that she had not done herself. Amanda's PoP project was focused on improving the number of minority students enrolled in advanced placement courses in her school.

Stephanie

Stephanie had the opportunity to work as a STEM coordinator and an International Baccalaureate program coordinator prior to becoming a school administrator. These positions afforded her a chance to work in a quasi-administrative role with the teachers in her schools. She became a high school assistant principal in her sixth year in the profession. Promotions followed quickly thereafter. In her seventh year she was promoted from a 10-month appointment to a 12-month appointment as an assistant principal at the same school. Stephanie was still in that role at the time of the study. However, her principal was promoted to a district level leadership position in the middle of the 2018-19 school year and Stephanie was named acting principal for the remainder of the year. Of all of the participants in the study, Stephanie had the most exposure to a principal's daily work. Her school had maintained an A grade in the state accountability system for several years and was recognized as one of the highest performing secondary schools in the district. Stephanie also felt inspired by the high school principal she replaced to pursue training in the Level II program. She felt that she used a situational style of leadership that depended on the task facing her. Stephanie believed that supporting teachers and empowering them was one of her most important roles. Her PoP project was focused on creating a multi-tiered system of services (MTSS) to reduce the number of students who failed a course through the tenth grade. Stephanie believed this would improve her school's graduation rate.

Jaime

Jaime taught for 8 years at the middle school and high school levels prior to becoming a high school GSP. She credited her four years of experience as a GSP with giving her the desire to move into an assistant principal role. Jaime worked for two years as a 10-month high school assistant principal. She was in her second year as a 12-month high school assistant principal at

the time of the study. Her school was located in a lower-income area of the school district. Jaime’s school had earned a B grade for the prior three years in the state accountability system. Jaime had always wanted to become a principal and credited that desire, along with inspiration from a previous principal, as the reasons for applying to the Level II program. Jaime felt that it was important to be available to her teachers and supportive of their needs. Her PoP project was focused on reducing course failures in Algebra I because that course was required for high school graduation. Table 4-2 details the leadership experience of each of the Level II participants and the topics of their PoP projects.

Table 4-2: Leadership Experience and PoP Project Topic

Name	Other Leadership Experience	PoP Project Topic
Susan	Teacher Leader	Fifth grade reading proficiency
	Title I Writing Coordinator	
Pamela	Teacher Leader	Third grade writing proficiency
	Reading Coach	
Jane	Drop-out prevention	Algebra I proficiency
	Guidance Services Professional	
Amanda	Teacher Leader	Minority enrollment in AP courses
	Guidance Services Professional	
Stephanie	Teacher Leader	Reduction of 10 th grade retentions through MTSS
	STEM Grant Coordinator	
	International Baccalaureate Coordinator	
Jamie	Teacher Leader	Algebra I proficiency
	Guidance Services Professional	

Problem Identification, Focus Question, and Plan of Action

This section addressed the first research question:

How do assistant principals in the Level II Certification program identify specific problems of practice, develop focus questions, and create a plan of action to follow?

The general framework of each PoP project was pre-determined by the district strategic plan. Elementary school assistant principals were required to select a PoP topic in the area of early childhood literacy. Middle school assistant principals were required to work on Algebra I proficiency. High school assistant principals were required to select a PoP topic in the area of college and career readiness or graduation rate. With the exception of middle schools, the district strategic plan allowed for many possible PoP topics for each participant in the Level II program. The initial task for each participant was how to identify one specific area of focus for their PoP project, develop a narrow focus question, and create an action plan to drive their work.

District Expectations

The school district required assistant principals to participate in a problem of practice simulation as part of the application process to enter the Level II Program. This problem of practice simulation was designed to be an individual activity that examined assistant principals' abilities to analyze a data set and determine how to address student issues found within the data. Assistant principals were allowed to select between an elementary, middle, or high school data set to analyze. They were given three hours to review the data and develop an action plan to address the specific needs of the school they had selected. No other components were required.

While the problem of practice simulation they engaged in prior to starting the Level II Certification program was an individual activity, the PoP project that is the focus of this study was designed to be a team activity that involved the collaboration of each assistant principal and

their Level II committee members. Each Level II committee was comprised of the assistant principal in the Level II program, their supervising principal, a mentor principal from another school, a district level director from Elementary or Secondary Leading and Learning depending on the type of school, and the Director of Professional Learning and Development from the school district. The purpose of the Level II committee was to provide guidance to the assistant principal through their PoP project.

The district Director of Professional Learning and Development provided training to Level II Certification program assistant principals and their supervising principals at the start of the school year. No other Level II committee members were present at this training. The district training was meant to provide an overview of all of the components of the Level II Certification program, including the PoP project. Although the assistant principals received the PoP project template shown in Table 4-3 at this training, the Director only provided a brief description of each section. The Director did not provide supporting examples to help the assistant principals attain a thorough understanding of the components. The assistant principals were told to complete this template and submit it to their Level II committee at the conclusion of their PoP project by the end of the 2018-2019 school year.

The school district subsequently experienced a leadership transition in the position of Director of Professional Learning and Development after the initial training. The Director who helped create the Level II Certification program, selected the initial cohort of assistant principals in the program, and conducted the initial program training for this group was promoted to another district position in October 2018. The new Director was an experienced principal from within the school district. However, this individual had very little experience with the requirements of the new Level II Certification program, including the PoP project. This

transition in leadership meant that the new Director was learning on the job throughout the year as the assistant principals in the Level II program were attempting to implement their PoP projects.

Table 4-3: Problem of Practice Template

Part	Components	
1. Data Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Share three-year disaggregated data from your school. b. What questions does the data generate? c. What clarifying questions does the Level II committee have about the data? d. Narrow concentration to one well-crafted, defined question that will be the focus of the PoP project. 	
2. Focus Question Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Research your focus question b. Determine possible solutions from your research c. Discuss solutions with your Level II committee d. What one solution to your focus question will you implement? 	
3. Action Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Create target goal b. Professional development needed c. Professional development led d. Focus meetings e. Communication plan f. Progress monitoring-feedback loop g. On-going reflections h. Post-action plan data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State the overall goal for the PoP project List all professional development attended applicable to the PoP project List professional development led for PoP project stakeholders List meetings held with PoP project stakeholders to check in on new processes and procedures in place related to the focus question Share how new process or procedure in PoP project was explained to stakeholder groups Explain how PoP project was monitored during implementation List opportunities for reflection with stakeholders during PoP project implementation Post implementation data presentation to Level II committee
4. Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Write overview of PoP project and final outcome b. Actions recommended by Level II committee c. Final reflection d. Florida Principal Leadership Standards addressed 	

The following mid-year exchange between the assistant principals and the new Director illustrates the concern among the participants as well as the uncertainty of the Director:

Director: The PoP is the biggest activity. Needs the most feedback. There is still a lack of understanding from team members about what it is supposed to be. I feel like there was a lack of fidelity to the process about you guys bringing the data to the team to discuss it.

Pamela: Really, our action plan should be after we have the data.

Amanda: We have to do two PoP over two years. I was confused about how the entire thing unfolds.

Pamela: It took half the year to determine the problem for me...

Jaime: I feel like Jane. I feel like I am behind as well...

Susan: I feel like we've been waiting to do something and did not have clear direction...

Director: Yes, we are all learning.

Pamela commented about how the leadership transition within the district was a challenge for the assistant principals in the Level II program. She said,

And then there's been some transition with our teams this year. I mean, (new Director) coming in in the middle after we had (old Director) was a shift, because she knew us from the (Level II) program, then him (new Director) coming in and doesn't have a whole lot of background about us as leaders...

For each assistant principal, part one of the process involved investigating trends in their own school's data. They had several different sources of data at their disposal. These data sources included student achievement data from local and state assessments, disaggregated sub-

group data, course failure and graduation rate data, college and career readiness data³, parent survey data, and school climate data. The initial Director instructed assistant principals to think about their data as if they were a principal reviewing the same data for their school during the summer months. They were guided to ask questions such as, *What aspects of the data stood out? What parts of the data presented a problem for their school to investigate and solve?*

The assistant principals were directed to record any questions they generated as they disaggregated their school's data. This usually resulted in a large number of possible questions about school data that each assistant principal could bring to their Level II committee for discussion. The meeting data show that the school district expected assistant principals to discuss the questions generated from their data with their Level II committee so that the committee members could help them identify a PoP project topic and narrow the focus of their PoP project into one, well-defined, focus question. However, this expectation was not communicated to the assistant principals during their initial training.

Once a narrow focus question had been created, the second part of the template asked each assistant principal to conduct research in order to identify possible solutions. Their research included, but was not limited to, literature review of best practices, site visits at other schools, classroom observations, and consultations with other school leaders throughout and beyond the school district. Again, the school district expected the assistant principals to collaborate with their Level II committee to identify solutions to their focus question that they had not considered.

Part three of the district template detailed the eight required components of each assistant principals' action plan. Action plans had to contain a target goal based on each assistant principals' focus question. However, the district did not specify a particular format for the target

³ A student is defined as college or career ready if they have passed an Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge, or Industry Certification exam with a qualifying score.

goal. There was also no requirement that the target goal include data or a way to measure outcomes. The next two required components were professional development. Assistant principals had to list the professional development they attended to learn more about their focus question then describe the professional development they led for their faculties. The actual amount of professional development required was not specified by the school district. This was likely due to the individual nature of each PoP project and the needs of the stakeholders involved.

The fourth and fifth required components of the action plan were focus meetings and a specific communication plan. The focus meetings were intended to place assistant principals in front of the stakeholders who would be doing the actual work implied by the focus question. In every case, the largest stakeholder group involved were teachers. Therefore, it was important to schedule focus meetings on a regular basis so that the assistant principals could remind teachers of the problem they were trying to impact. It was during these meetings that assistant principals implemented part of their communication plan by either training or reminding teachers. Communication plans could also include provisions for informing students, or even external stakeholders, depending on the focus question.

The last three required components were a progress monitoring and feedback loop, ongoing personal reflections, and post-action plan data. Again, no specific format was required by the district for any of the components. The progress monitoring component could be anything from a simple check in with the appropriate stakeholder group to a more complex monitoring system. For example, in Stephanie's action plan the progress monitoring component only required her to monitor student grades and check in with her MTSS team. In contrast, Susan's progress monitoring plan involved a more complex arrangement of checking teacher lesson

plans, conversations with key stakeholders, and monitoring student data on district created reading assessments.

The on-going reflection component could be completed individually or collectively with stakeholders during implementation of the PoP project. These reflection activities typically occurred in meetings between the assistant principals and groups of teachers involved in implementation of the PoP project. The final component of the action plan was post-action plan data. This section was designed to require assistant principals to explain the data they used to measure the outcome of their PoP project and their learning for any future action.

Part four of the district template was a summary activity. It required assistant principals to provide a written explanation of their PoP project, why it was chosen, how it was implemented, and the final outcome of their work on the PoP project over the course of the school year. Included in this section was an expectation for assistant principals to discuss actions related to their PoP project that their Level II committee felt should be implemented. The section concluded with a final reflection of the PoP project and a list of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards addressed during the project.

In summary, the district expected the PoP project to be a collaborative task between the assistant principals and the members of their Level II committees. The district provided a template to guide completion of the PoP project that was to be completed by each assistant principal by the end of the 2018-19 academic year. However, the initial program training did not clarify this expectation or fully explain the template components. The leadership transition that occurred after the assistant principals began their Level II program further affected communication of district expectations, leading to major challenges in PoP project implementation described below.

Major Challenges

Assistant principals in the Level II program faced major challenges when they began work on their PoP projects. These challenges as identified through the meeting notes and interviews were: (1) confusion about the district expectations, (2) a lack of guidance due to limited meeting frequency, and (3) a major delay in the progress of assistant principals' PoP projects. These challenges are explained in this section.

Confusion About District Expectations. Assistant principals were not specifically told of the district's expectation that the PoP project was intended to be a team activity between them and their Level II committee. The result was that some assistant principals were confused about the process and attempted to complete components of their PoP project on their own without collaborating with their Level II committee. The only prior experience the assistant principals had with a problem of practice before beginning their PoP project was the individual problem of practice simulation they had completed during their selection process for the Level II Certification program. The following exchange between Pamela and the Director at her Level II committee meeting in December 2018 illustrates this finding:

Pamela: I drafted a focus question for the third-grade team.

Director: Maybe you can take this long question and pick one part and make the rest some of your action steps to accomplish your problem of practice. You have obviously reflected and spent a lot of time on this. You probably did too much on your own without involving the team. You had a lot of focus questions we could have helped you narrow.

Pamela: Yes, I just took it and ran with it.

Susan was also confused about the district expectation of working with her Level II committee, as shown by her comment about bringing her data to the committee to identify a PoP project topic:

Well, I identified the problem of practice at my school first, have been thinking about it all summer frankly, or every time data comes out that's what I think about and I study it. So, for me, it might be different; whereas, they (Level II committee) didn't really tell me.

When assistant principals did follow the district expectation to collaborate with their Level II committee they sometimes found that their committee members were not well informed about the components of the PoP project. In the following exchange Pamela asked the Director about the format for her action plan, but he did not mention the district template:

Pamela: I have questions about my action plan. Is there a particular format?

Director: You need to have something you can measure and some type of implementation indicators.

A similar exchange about the action plan occurred between Jaime and the Director:

Jaime: I really feel like I was slow on this because I just didn't know.

Director: I think a lot of us were slow on the PoP because we just didn't know the process and what to do.

In another case, one of the supervising principals on a Level II committee did not understand how to create a focus question:

Director: You really have three different focus questions in your data. You need to focus on one area.

Ariel⁴: Can you give us an example of a focus question?

Later in the school year the Director became more familiar with the PoP components and corrected the misunderstanding of a Level II committee member during a meeting:

Susan: I was able to create one focus question around the PoP.

Robert⁵: Where did your list of questions come from?

Director: Yes, the candidate is supposed to generate questions based on the data, then the team can help the candidate narrow them down to one focus question.

Lack of Guidance Due to Limited Meeting Frequency. The school district communicated to the participants that each of them were expected to meet with their Level II committee once per quarter, or a total of four times per year. Assistant principals felt that the frequency of meetings with their Level II committees were insufficient to provide enough guidance to navigate the components of the PoP project. Stephanie commented,

The only thing I would say...and I know it's hard with their (Level II committee) schedules, but to even have maybe a couple more meetings up front in the beginning. Because I think that was probably the hardest part was waiting, you know, a quarter of the year to have your next meeting when some of those conversations might have sparked some more questioning or some more things earlier on.

Pamela echoed this sentiment, stating,

It's made me think maybe we need to meet more than four times a year because we had our summer meeting, and then we had the fall meeting, and then we didn't have a third meeting...So, I'd like the opportunity to check in more than just four times a year, and it's hard enough to schedule four times a year. So, I don't know. I liked the whole group

⁴ Supervising principal

⁵ Level II committee member

opportunity (district meeting for all assistant principals in February 2018), but I feel like I missed my team time.

Amanda felt that she could not move forward in her PoP project because her Level II team did not meet frequently enough. She commented,

And so, it can become frustrating that I've done my part one, and now I've done my part two, but I can't move forward because I need my team to guide me to the next step...I feel like I've been held up a little bit.

Major Delay in the Progress of PoP Projects. These challenges faced by assistant principals led to delays for most of them in starting their PoP projects. These challenges were exacerbated by assistant principals' job responsibilities at the start of a new school year and their commitment to complete the other four components of their Level II program concurrently with their PoP project. By the end of September 2018, only 50% of the assistant principals in the program had held their first Level II committee meeting. More telling is that there was no mention of the PoP projects in Level II committee meetings until November 2018, nearly four months after assistant principals' district training on the components of the Level II Certification program. The assistant principals tended to work on the other four, less complex, components of their Level II Certification program first. Jaime illustrated this tendency, commenting,

I was busting away on my priority responses, and I was hitting my PD, and I'm doing my shadowing and my own with that problem of practice, I don't want to touch it, because it was scary, you know...don't let someone wait as long as I waited. It's not good. Because I worked backwards which defeated the purpose...Good things still came out of it, but I bet it could have been better, had I done it the right way...people need more guidance with it.”

Other assistant principals felt that lack of a district timeline to guide completion of the PoP project may have caused delays. Susan said,

Probably there should be steps along the way. We set our calendar, but maybe it would be better to check in every, say, two months, like on purpose. I set my calendar, but I'm driven to do my own work...but if you don't have that personality, it might be easy to let (PoP project) fall part, or not stay focused as you should.

Jane felt that a district timeline would have provided more clarity into the entire process of completing her PoP project. She commented,

I would just say, not with the (PoP) activity itself, but like with the timeline...I think that since we were the first class to like actually have to go through and do it, it was just not a lot of clarity in what it would look like and how we would do it, so we didn't get started with it right away...So, I think maybe just a little more clarity at the beginning, and then when you have that first, you know, level two meeting, like it should be a large part of the conversation...I would just think the timing especially when you're first starting out, it was not real clear...

In summary, assistant principals were hampered by the challenges present at the start of their PoP projects. Confusion about the expectations of the school district were caused, in part, because of insufficient training at the start of the school year. Assistant principals were also challenged by the quarterly meeting schedule with their Level II committees, which resulted in a lack of guidance in the PoP project overall. These challenges resulted in delays of up to one quarter of the school year for some assistant principals in implementing their PoP projects.

Identifying a PoP Topic and Developing a Focus Question

Although the assistant principals faced challenges at the start of their PoP projects, all of them were eventually able to identify a topic for their project and develop a focus question. Each assistant principal identified one solution to the focus question they would implement as part of their PoP project. This solution became the foundation for their action plan. The PoP project topics and focus questions selected by assistant principals are shown in Table 4-4.

Table 4-4: PoP Project Topics and Focus Questions

Name	PoP Project Topic	Focus Question
Susan	Fifth grade reading proficiency	Why are only 34% of 5 th grade students making an annual learning gain in ELA?
Pamela	Third grade writing proficiency	How can I support the third grade team with feedback on planning for writing instruction and modeling of writing strategies?
Jane	Algebra I proficiency	How can I improve the instructional practices of Algebra I teachers?
Amanda	Minority enrollment in AP courses	How can I increase minority participation in AP courses?
Stephanie	Reduction of 10 th grade retentions	Will improved systems for monitoring students through multi-tiered system of services decrease student retention in 10 th grade and ultimately lead to an increase in graduation rate?
Jamie	Algebra I proficiency	Will an improved monitoring system for guidance counselors improve Algebra I proficiency?

Ultimately, only four of the six assistant principals were able to go further in their PoP project and create a specific action plan to drive their work. They attributed much of their success to the collaborative work they engaged in with their Level II committee. In every case, the data suggest that the limited collaboration that occurred between the assistant principals and their Level II committee members was a key factor in overcoming the challenges they faced during their PoP projects. Even though committee members had not received any district training on the PoP projects, they were able to use their career experience to guide the assistant principals. Each member of the Level II committees of these four assistant principals had served the school district as a school principal and were well-accustomed with reviewing student data and developing plans to address student needs, even if they did not always understand the components of the PoP project.

Assistant principals found the experience and guidance of their Level II teams to be helpful with examining multiple sources of school data and determining what to do next. Pamela said,

I really went into the meeting with data that we had already collected. It was mostly student data and from that we drew some conclusions about teaching practices, but they're helping guide me with questions to come back to the school and say okay, what am I looking for now.

Stephanie had a similar experience as she worked with her Level II team to identify a topic for her PoP project. She shared,

So, their feedback is basically asking me questions and suggesting different data points... "have you thought of (this)?" "have you looked at (that)?" ...it has been really good at helping me narrow what I think my school might need and what I think might be an issue.

Susan felt that her Level II committee helped her see aspects of her school's data that she had not seen on her own. She said,

I shared every bit of data and what the team does for me is they ask a battery of questions that maybe I didn't think of.

In contrast, the assistant principals who could not develop an action plan seem not to have received direction or guidance in a timely manner. Jane said,

I'm just, you know, kind of waiting for our next meeting that's coming up here in a couple weeks to get, you know, now that I'm kind of at a stopping point, like I don't know where to go next, and get some ideas and pull on their experiences, and look for some direction.

The four assistant principals who completed their PoP projects were able to do so in spite of the challenges they faced. The collaboration between them and the members of their Level II committees seems to be a major factor that helped them overcome the challenges present at the start of their PoP projects. Even though the members of the Level II committees were not well-versed in the components of the PoP project, their career experience helped them provide guidance to the assistant principals. These four assistant principals took the initiative to work on their own between Level II meetings in an effort to complete their PoP projects, even if their work was eventually refined by their Level II committee members. The two assistant principals who did not develop an action plan tended to wait for direction from their Level II committees because of their uncertainty with the PoP project. For these two assistant principals, the quarterly meeting schedule resulted in a lack of guidance that hampered their ability to develop and implement an action plan like the other assistant principals in their Level II program.

Action Plan Implementation

The overarching focus of this section was to understand the experience of assistant principals in the Level II Certification program as they implemented their action plans during their PoP project. The research question addressed in this section was:

How do assistant principals implement their plan of action in the PoP project?

Comparing Two Cases

Assistant principals in the Level II Certification program encountered challenges as explained above that affected implementation of their PoP projects. The result was that only four of the six assistant principals in the Level II Certification program were able to complete all of the components of the PoP project as required by the district. Three of these four assistant principals, two elementary and one high school, approached implementation of their PoP projects in a similar fashion. I have elected to focus on two distinctly different cases, Stephanie and Jamie, in this section in order to illustrate the variations in how assistant principals completed their action plan and implemented their PoP project. Although Stephanie and Jamie were able to complete all of the required district components of their PoP project during the course of the school year, they approached implementation of their PoP project in very different ways.

Table 4-5 provides the school context in which Stephanie and Jamie worked during the time they implemented their action plans for their PoP projects. Both of them worked as high school assistant principals at the time of the study and had the same target goal of improving their graduation rate. However, the school contexts were different. Stephanie's high school was one of the newest, and largest schools, in the school district. The majority of her student population was White, with Hispanic students comprising the largest minority group on campus. Her school was located in a relatively affluent area of the county and had a low poverty rate

compared with similar high schools within the school district. Stephanie’s school also had a below average number of students with disabilities compared with similar high schools. Her school had one of the highest graduation rates in the school district and had repeatedly earned the highest school grade awarded by the State of Florida. Stephanie’s school also enjoyed significant parent and community involvement in their academic and extracurricular programs.

Table 4-5: Context of Two High Schools

Demographics	Stephanie	Jaime	District Avg.
White	70-80%	61-70%	61-70%
African-American	0-10%	11-20%	11-20%
Hispanic	5-15%	5-15%	11-20%
Asian	0-10%	0-10%	0-10%
Multi-Racial	0-10%	0-10%	0-10%
Enrollment	2101-2300	1201-1400	1400-1600
English Language Learner	0-5%	0-5%	0-5%
Students with Disabilities	0-10%	11-20%	11-20%
Poverty Rate	11-20%	41-60%	41-60%
Graduation Rate	95%	87%	88%
School Grade	A	B	A

In contrast, Jaime’s high school was one of the oldest schools in the school district. It was located in a more rural, less affluent part of the county. As a result, the poverty rate was near the average for similar high schools within the school district. The majority of Jamie’s student population was also White, but her largest minority group was African-American. The

numbers of Hispanic, Asian, and Multi-Racial students were similar to Stephanie's school. Total student enrollment placed Jamie's school slightly below the district average for high schools. Jaime's school had nearly twice the number of students with disabilities. The graduation rate at Jaime's school was similar to the school district average. Parent and community involvement were a source of concern at Jaime's school. In many ways, Jaime's high school was similar to the typical high school within the school district.

Since they worked in a high school, the district Strategic Plan required them to focus their PoP project on a topic connected with college and career readiness or graduation rate. Both of these administrators chose to pursue improvement in their school's graduation rate through their PoP project. Stephanie addressed graduation rate by constructing her action plan to revise the MTSS process at her school. Jaime chose to address graduation rate in her school by focusing on Algebra I proficiency. How Stephanie and Jamie approached these challenges in their action plans, and how they implemented them, is discussed in the next section.

PoP Project and School Improvement Plan

Stephanie and Jamie shared similarities as administrators when they implemented their action plans. They held the same administrative position in a high school, they had received the same district training in August 2018 about the requirements of the PoP project, and they had the same job responsibilities associated with their positions at their schools. One important job responsibility was the creation of a school improvement plan. Their administrative positions carried a district expectation that they would analyze their school's data and work with their administrative team and other stakeholders to create a state-mandated school improvement plan for their school.

Schools in the State of Florida are required to submit a school improvement plan each year to their school board that details how the school will improve conditions or outcomes for students. These school improvement plans include a review of school data, a specific school-based objective, barriers to achieving the objective, strategies for achieving the objective, and in-process measures to track the school's progress toward the objective. Stephanie and Jamie had been involved previously in the creation of school improvement plans for their schools before they were admitted to the Level II Certification program.

A major difference between Stephanie and Jaime was how they used their previous experience with school improvement planning to implement their action plans for their PoP projects. Stephanie chose to integrate her action plan for her PoP project into her school improvement plan. Jaime chose to keep her action plan and her school improvement plan as separate processes. This decision of whether to integrate the action plan and the school improvement plan ultimately affected how efficiently Stephanie and Jaime were able to implement their action plans for their PoP projects. Their action plans are shown in Table 4-6.

Stephanie. Stephanie's decision to integrate her action plan into her school improvement plan meant that she would not be solely responsible for implementation. Her action plan involved a team approach of working with teachers and guidance counselors to improve the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) at her school. Stephanie's action plan required revision of school processes and procedures related to MTSS and the input of multiple professionals on her campus to be successful. By integrating her action plan into her school improvement plan Stephanie distributed the labor required to do the work and created an efficient system that made implementation of her action plan more successful than she could have accomplished on her own.

Table 4-6: Comparison of Action Plans in Two Cases

Component	Stephanie	Jaime
PoP Project Topic	Reductions of 10 th grade retentions	Algebra I proficiency
Focus Question	Will improved systems for monitoring students through MTSS decrease student retention in 10 th grade and ultimately lead to an increase in graduation rate?	Will an improved monitoring system for guidance counselors improve Algebra I proficiency?
Target Goal	MTSS to ensure mastery of standards and increase graduation rate	To improve the graduation rate
Professional Development Attended	MTSS Problem Solving Training MTSS Early Indicator Training	Individual data training with district personnel
Professional Development Led	MTSS Training MTSS Referral Process Making Learning Visible for All Students	Guidance department training Visible Learning
Focus Meetings	MTSS team meetings twice per month with 7 teachers (10 meetings total throughout the year)	Administrative meetings Data analysis meetings with Guidance staff MTSS meetings
Communication Plan	Explain new MTSS process to guidance, administrative team, and faculty	Share failure data at monthly leadership team meeting
Progress Monitoring-Feedback	Use shared Google Doc to track focus students and monitoring student grades on Focus Feedback from each attendee after each MTSS meeting Feedback on the student supports	Weekly guidance meetings to review graduation deficiency report
On-Going Reflections	Monthly meetings with MTSS chairperson to discuss the process and progress	Discussions with administrative and guidance personnel Feedback session with teachers

Stephanie shared her perspective about school improvement planning in the following excerpt,

The data comes out in the summer...and then you immediately make a decision as to what you have to do with school improvement plan...So, I think going through these (PoP project) questions and having to really focus, and then say, how many kids am I truly impacting with this or will impact when I do a school improvement process going forward?

Stephanie felt that her decision to integrate her action plan with her school improvement plan really helped her better understand the PoP project holistically. She said,

My understanding was shifted after the Director had explained to us to look at it (PoP project) like you would look at your data in the summer, and when the data comes back really sitting down and doing that reflection but doing it for much longer, almost like a school improvement plan goal. And once he explained that to me, all of the confusion that surrounded the problem of practice, I felt like I had so much more clarity.

The way Stephanie engaged in her action plan was reflected in her focus on working with and through other members of her team to make the plan successful. She shared,

The other aspects of that or even just getting people on board to be part of that vision...some people had an idea of what it might have looked like in the past or why MTSS hadn't worked. So, just getting the team of staff members who was part of the team to understand that why we were doing it, and that this isn't just something like we're starting and it's going to go away, but getting them to commit, to putting it on their calendar, to come in consistently, to working through the process to be able to see that result.

To draw teacher commitment for MTSS, Stephanie organized MTSS team meetings twice per month with seven teachers in 10 meetings total throughout the year (Table 4-6). This structure allowed her to engage teachers in collective sense-making of why they were implementing MTSS and how they could work together in the improvement process through MTSS.

Through input from her teachers, Stephanie also developed a process that maximized communication with the faculty and monitored the progress of the students involved with MTSS (see Table 4-6). She said,

One of the things that worked really well, that I got a lot of positive feedback from the teachers, was the way we did feedback and the way we communicated using a spreadsheet and really a Google doc to get their feedback. ...it was almost as good as having those teachers in the meeting, with doing it in a way that protected their time...

Stephanie's decision to integrate her school improvement plan into her action plan promoted ownership of the revisions to her MTSS process by her entire staff. By working collaboratively with her MTSS team, Stephanie was able to engage key staff in discussion about why a more robust MTSS process was necessary. Her collaborative approach not only helped to make MTSS a priority for her entire school, but also allowed everyone to share in process of successful implementation.

Jamie. In contrast, Jaime chose not to integrate her action plan into her school improvement plan. For Jaime, this meant that she was responsible not only for implementing the initiatives in her state-mandated school improvement plan. She also had to implement the action plan for her PoP project on her own in addition to all of her other job responsibilities. Jaime's action plan was designed to create an improved progress monitoring system for her guidance

counselors. It required the commitment and dedication of other professionals on her campus to be successful.

Jamie approached her action plan by setting her expectations with a list of non-negotiables and a timeline. She expressed in her PoP template her concern about a lack of structure, “After finishing my first year at THS, it was evident that there was a serious lack of processes, procedures, and progress monitoring.” This led her to approach her action plan by establishing the structure. In the same document, she explained:

I began by setting my expectations for the guidance department. I held a mandatory meeting with all counselors, the Principal, a District Director, the guidance resource teachers, the district Truancy Officer, the school Dean, the GSP, the ESE contact, the Literacy Coach, and myself. I created a list of expectations and non-negotiables as well as a timeline. I then held meetings with the guidance department each week.

Unlike Stephanie, her meetings were mainly with guidance counselors instead of with teachers and her interaction with teachers were during feedback sessions after classroom observation (see Table 4-6).

Jamie’s decision not to integrate her action plan into her school improvement plan made implementation of her action plan more challenging. She shared her experience of working with her guidance counselors,

Mine has to do with the guidance department, mostly, because obviously, looking at graduation rates, the biggest challenge for me has been turnover, and really getting everyone to follow through. So I have pieces in place and I delegate pieces to other people, and they may not get done. And so then it was constant follow-up, follow-up, follow-up which has put me behind where I want to be.

Jaime felt that although she was relying on her guidance counselors to help her implement her action plan, she often had to do the work herself. She said,

Some pieces are still a work in progress, if I'm being completely honest, but basically me following up and having to go back and say, "nope, this isn't right. I need you to do this," or sometimes doing it myself. Maybe I asked to get (it) done and I really needed it, I maybe just had to do it.

As the school year unfolded, and Jaime struggled with implementation, she came to the realization that using her school improvement plan as a vehicle to drive the work she was trying to accomplish in her action plan would have been a more efficient way to work. She shared,

So, I think I see the bigger picture of, you know, you look at data in your school improvement plan goal, and each of your teachers setting their own goals, and how does that all come together, and then PD should really be in place to support that. Sounds like common sense, but it just kind of clicked for me, you know, that all of those things can work together.

At the end of the school year, Jaime reflected on the work she had done throughout the year with her action plan. Although she felt that she did have some success, she was determined to do things differently next year. She said,

We need to be forced to start this from the beginning. Because although some good things came out of my problem of practice this first one, I know it's going to work the way it should next year. Because I can start in the summer, and I can look at data, and I can look at my school improvement plan and my PD plan and all these things, and put everything together that I would be doing anyway, but I could make this also coincide instead of feeling like it was on top of my job.

Jaime's approach to implementation focused on structure and non-negotiables at the expense of collaboration with her stakeholders. Her decision not to integrate her action plan into her school improvement plan resulted in Jaime trying to implement an action plan in which her guidance counselors had very little buy-in. Consequently, Jaime spent much of her time following up with her counselors to see if they were doing the work she had prescribed to improve the progress monitoring system at her school. Jaime's approach ultimately made implementation more challenging and less efficient than Stephanie's.

Explaining the Differences in Action Plan Implementation

This section addressed the third research question:

What explains the differences in assistant principals' implementation of their action plans as instructional leaders?

Stephanie found implementation of her action plan to be a much smoother process than Jaime because of the decision she had made to integrate it into her school improvement plan. In addition to this finding, there are two other possible findings within the data that may help explain the differences in outcomes between Stephanie and Jaime. These are differences within their school position and their leadership orientation as assistant principals.

School Position

Stephanie and Jamie held the exact same administrative position at the time they started implementation of their action plans. Their district job description made them primarily responsible for curriculum and instruction at their schools, which included all aspects of scheduling, teaching assignments, acquisition of curriculum materials, professional development, student interventions, and progress monitoring. However, they differed in how their position evolved during the course of the school year.

Stephanie's principal was promoted to a district level position shortly after the school year began. This abrupt change in the leadership structure of her school presented Stephanie with an opportunity to gain valuable leadership experience. District leaders subsequently decided to name Stephanie the acting principal of her school for the remainder of the school year. This sudden elevation in her status at the school gave Stephanie control over school level decisions and changed her perspective about her position. She credited her success partially due to her promotion when she discussed instruction at her school, saying,

I think I've changed a lot in that role, in that I was both as the problem of practice and even the acting principal, I basically was, prior to that, I was going just as the assistant principal for curriculum, going into my social studies classrooms, going into my guidance department, but not really school-wide or looking at what's going on school wide.

Unlike Stephanie, Jaime's principal remained in her position throughout the course of the year. Consequently, Jaime continued to execute to her duties as the assistant principal at her school without having the opportunity to attain the same perspective of school leadership as Stephanie. Although Jamie did not receive the same opportunity, she was able to see the need within her school's data to improve progress monitoring at her school, noting,

I found a lack of procedures and monitoring practices in the guidance office.

Specifically, I have noticed that the students showing up on the deficiency report are not being properly monitored...most of the time teachers are not calling home when students are failing. Additionally, guidance counselors aren't calling home for these students either.

The differences in the leadership position may have placed Jaime in a disadvantageous position compared to Stephanie, making her less inclined to see her action plan as a school-wide process

that could be implemented more efficiently by integrating it into her school improvement plan. Jaime ultimately had to do more of the work of implementation herself and she struggled with getting guidance counselors and teachers on board with her action plan.

Leadership Orientation

Different approaches to leadership seem to have also contributed to how effectively Stephanie and Jaime were able to implement their action plans. Stephanie was a collaborative leader who promoted buy-in from her entire staff for school initiatives and then supported them in their work. She described her approach,

I would say that I'm someone who very much believes in supporting people, very much let's work together to get this done, very much—I like systems and processes in place but then coming behind to support people with fulfilling that.

Stephanie valued input from other professionals on her campus to make sense of complex student issues and believed that these issues sometimes required flexible thinking and a willingness to change. She illustrated the flexible nature of her leadership approach by describing how she refined her action plan,

So, coming up with my action plan, it wasn't something that necessarily was the straight thing. And it changed and diverted as things changed and things happened, and getting feedback from staff members has helped shape that.

Stephanie believed that her collaborative approach not only promoted staff buy-in, but also created an environment where they could work together to make sense of student issues. She shared,

My style is much more positive, much more we're in this together, much more we're a team, developing other people and raising up other leaders too, and inclusive.

Jaime also enjoyed working with the professionals on her staff, but her approach to leadership tended to focus more on creating policies and procedures. She saw the lack of structure at her school as a major problem and tried to establish non-negotiables with her staff to address the issues. Instead of collaboration with others to find solutions to the issues at her school, Jaime put new procedures in place and then spent her time following up with staff. She shared how she felt this approach was beneficial to her campus,

So, there's not a procedure in place. So there's not a policy in place and everybody's running around crazy. I can fix that if I just put something in place.

Jaime considered herself to be a teacher-friendly administrator, saying,

People see me out on duty. They're not afraid to come up and ask me a question even if they know it's not really in my realm. I'll try to help in whatever way I can."

At the same time, she realized her approach may have caused her staff to view her as a rigid, by the book leader. She reflected,

So, people may tend to think I'm a by the book type of person, but I also understand gray area and I understand that we have to look at things case by case.

Jaime spent a considerable amount of time in meetings with different groups of professionals on her campus during implementation of her action plan. The meetings were a way to hold her staff accountable for working to improve student outcomes that might ultimately affect her school's graduation rate. It was time-intensive for her, as Jaime attended leadership team meetings, curriculum data meetings, and weekly guidance meetings to implement her plan. Jaime felt this was necessary because her staff had not been proactive at addressing student failures. She wrote,

When I asked who was responsible for this task in the past, everyone passed the buck with no one taking responsibility for this failure to our students...I created a list of expectations and non-negotiables as well as a timeline. I then held meetings with the guidance department each week...my plan is to continue implementing processes and procedures to further assist our students and ultimately improve our graduation rate.

Jaime's leadership approach throughout the year was illustrated by her final reflection in her action plan. She realized that the policies and procedures she had set in place required her to check the work her staff had accomplished. She wrote,

My biggest takeaway throughout this process has been that I cannot simply check "in" on the processes and procedures that I put into place. Rather, I have to check "on" the completion of each task. I learned this the hard way multiple times this school year.

Summary

Analysis of the data collected from the assistant principals in the Level II Certification program revealed several important findings. Challenges were present from the beginning of the Level II program as assistant principals attempted to design and implement their PoP projects. Both the assistant principals and their Level II committee members suffered from a lack of district training on the components of the PoP project. Assistant principals also misunderstood how the school district expected them to work with their Level II committees to implement their projects. The confusion that resulted from these challenges, combined with a lack of overall guidance from their Level II committees, resulted in major delays in PoP project implementation.

The assistant principals who were able to successfully design and implement an action plan for their PoP project did so by integrating their action plan with their state-mandated school improvement plan. This process made implementation more efficient by integrating the work

into assistant principals' daily jobs and involving multiple stakeholders to perform the actual work. Differences in school position and leadership orientation seem to have also made a difference in how assistant principals were able to implement their action plans.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study investigated how assistant principals implemented a Problem of Practice (PoP) project embedded within the Level II Certification program created by Brevard County Public Schools. A qualitative research design was utilized to explore how assistant principals identified specific PoP project topics, developed focus questions, and created an action plan to guide their work. This study also investigated how two assistant principals implemented the action plans for their PoP projects and explored the factors that seem to explain the differences between them. This chapter summarizes the findings from each research question, interprets the findings based on the literature and the theoretical framework, and presents recommendations to district leaders about how to improve the PoP project for future cohorts of assistant principals enrolled in their Level II Certification program.

Challenges with the PoP Project

The data revealed that assistant principals experienced major challenges during the implementation of their PoP projects. These challenges were: (1) confusion about district expectations, (2) a lack of guidance due to limited meeting frequency, and (3) a major delay in the progress of assistant principals' PoP projects.

First, the assistant principals were confused about district expectations. They received a broad overview of all of the components in the Level II Certification program, including the PoP project. However, this initial training did not provide a detailed explanation about how assistant principals were to complete the PoP project. In addition, the assistant principals were not explicitly told that they were expected to work collaboratively with the members of their Level II

committees. This resulted in the assistant principals attempting to implement a year-long project without clear guidelines to follow.

Second, the assistant principals reported that they received only limited guidance because of the infrequent meetings with their Level II committees. The school district established a quarterly meeting schedule for assistant principals to discuss their ongoing work in the components of the Level II Certification program, including their progress on their PoP projects. The infrequent nature of these meetings meant that assistant principals often placed more than one component of their Level II Certification program on the agenda for discussion, reducing the time available to receive committee guidance on the PoP project. It also meant that assistant principals often lacked guidance on their PoP project at critical junctures of project implementation. This factor alone was a major reason that one of the assistant principals in the Level II program was unable to author an action plan for her PoP project. This lack of consistent collaboration with members of their Level II committees was not considered a best practice for student-centered PBL as established in the literature (Bridges, 1989, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1993, 1995, 1997; Copland, 2000; Ford et. al., 1997).

When the Level II committees did meet, assistant principals sometimes found that their committee members were not well trained on the components of the PoP project or the district's expectations for implementation. The only Level II committee members who received any district training on the Level II Certification program were the assistant principals in the initial cohort and their supervising principals from their own schools. Edens (2000) found that staff training was necessary in order for PBL to be used effectively with learners. The absence of training for committee members within the Level II Certification program was not supported by

the literature and was another barrier assistant principals had to overcome to implement their PoP projects.

Finally, assistant principals experienced delays in their PoP projects because of these challenges. The data revealed that assistant principals' confusion about district expectations and lack of clear guidance from their Level II committees often led them to address other components of their Level II Certification program before their PoP project. A timeline for completion of the four-part district template may have helped the assistant principals implement their PoP projects. For most of the assistant principals, there was delay between completion of their data review in part one of the district template and development of their action plan in part three. Assistant principals found it difficult to stay on track with their PoP projects while they were also fulfilling the other required components of their Level II Certification program and tending to their job responsibilities.

The literature on PBL supports this finding that timelines can be helpful to learners because they provide direction and milestones for project completion (Bridges, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Edens, 2000; Limerick, Clarke and Daws, 1997). Further, the literature indicates that the overall lack of structure presented by self-directed nature of PBL assignments can cause anxiety and stress for the learners (Edens, 2000; Limerick et. al., 1997). The findings from this study about assistant principals' experiences during PoP project implementation are consistent with the existing literature.

Action Plan Implementation in the PoP Project

As discussed above, the assistant principals in the Level II Certification program encountered several challenges as they implemented their PoP projects. The challenges were substantial enough that only four of six (66.6%) assistant principals in the first cohort of the

Level II Certification program were able to develop and implement an action plan to drive their work in their PoP projects. The other two assistant principals were unable to complete their PoP projects within the 2018-2019 school year.

In Chapter 4, I focused on two distinctly different cases of implementation represented by assistant principals Stephanie and Jamie. These two assistant principals began their PoP projects with similar administrative positions, job responsibilities, and district training. However, during the development and implementation phases of their action plans, Stephanie chose to integrate her action plan into her school's state-mandated school improvement plan. Jamie chose to keep those two plans as separate processes.

The decision of whether to integrate these two plans had implications for how efficiently Stephanie and Jamie were able to implement their action plans. In Stephanie's case, her decision to integrate the two plans allowed her to marshal the full resources of her school and involve more school personnel in the work that was necessary to implement her action plan. Stephanie believed this was an important factor in her success. She was responsible for completion of her PoP project, the four other components of her Level II Certification program, her state-mandated school improvement plan, and her other job responsibilities concurrently. Successful implementation was a matter of creating an efficient system that made her action plan a school-wide endeavor that did not rely on her work alone to accomplish the tasks involved. Stephanie found that integrating her action plan into her school improvement plan allowed her to work with and through the staff on her campus. It also allowed her to lead in a collaborative fashion that was reflective of her overall leadership style.

Jamie's decision to keep her action plan and her school improvement plan as separate processes worked against her for most of the school year. Jamie had the same job-related tasks

to complete, but leaving her action plan and school improvement plan separate only created more work for her over the course of the school year. Since she did not enjoy the same level of efficiency as Stephanie during action plan implementation, Jamie found herself setting firm expectations and non-negotiables with her staff in an attempt to make progress on the many tasks in front of her. This approach did not create buy-in with the staff she was relying on to do the work of implementation. Instead, Jamie found that she had to perform much of the work detailed in her action plan by herself instead of with others on her staff. Jaime may have completed her PoP project, but implementation came at the cost of greater effort and less personal satisfaction in the end.

The differences in how Stephanie and Jamie implemented their action plans also implied differences in their leadership styles. The data from this study revealed that Stephanie established collaborative processes within her action plan so that she could work closely with her staff on improving her school's graduation rate through revised MTSS procedures. Her approach valued the input of the teachers on her campus who helped her implement her plan. Stephanie understood that buy-in was essential for any school-wide process to work effectively. It also allowed her to direct the collective wisdom of her teachers to solving student issues at her school while remaining flexible to changing conditions on her campus.

Jamie's leadership style throughout the PoP project was largely about establishing procedures and expectations for her staff instead of promoting a collaborative atmosphere. Interview data suggested that she intended to work closely with her teachers to resolve school issues, but she did not encourage the kind of teamwork that would have made implementation of her action plan more efficient. Instead, Jamie spent time in meetings each week checking on the work she was relying on her staff to complete and she was often disappointed by their progress.

The conditions at each school may also explain the differences in how these two assistant principals implemented their action plans. The entire administrative staff at Jamie's school had worked together for less than two years at the time she began her PoP project. Jamie's administrative team assumed leadership of a school that had been more accustomed to working as sole proprietors instead of as collaborative teams. Further, Jamie found that her school did not have established policies or procedures in place for important school functions, such as progress monitoring students toward graduation. These factors may have influenced how she felt she had to lead her school and, ultimately, the decisions she made about implementing her action plan.

Stephanie benefited from working at a school that had enjoyed an experienced and long-tenured principal. Her school had already developed a collaborative culture that promoted teacher leadership at the time she started her PoP project. Schools that promote opportunities for teacher collaboration tend to have more positive school cultures (Boyd et. al., 2011). Stephanie was able to capitalize on these existing structures as she implemented her plan. She also benefited from a transition in the leadership structure of her school that Jamie did not. Stephanie's principal was promoted to another district position during the first semester in which she was developing and implementing her action plan. District leaders elevated Stephanie to acting principal of her school. This promotion gave her the opportunity to gain a different perspective on her school's operation that she would not have had otherwise.

In summary, the major finding of this study for research question two was the difference in how assistant principals integrated their school improvement plans into their action plans for their PoP project. The decision to integrate the two documents allowed one of the assistant principals to work more efficiently by utilizing school personnel and resources in addition to her own effort. The differences in how assistant principals implemented their action plans was also

explained by variations in their leadership orientation, school contexts, and school position for research question three.

Implications for Instructional Leadership

The theoretical framework for this study was drawn from Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) research on instructional leadership. Their framework proposed that instructional leadership tasks were broken into eight separate leadership functions as described in Chapter Two. These instructional leadership functions apply to the daily job responsibilities of the assistant principals in the Level II Certification program. They also help frame the discussion about the implications for instructional leadership as a result of assistant principals' participation in the PoP project.

The delays in the PoP project did not allow sufficient time for the assistant principals to grow in their instructional leadership in any measurable way. However, analysis of the data from this study suggest that their approaches to action plan implementation may provide growth opportunities in two of the eight leadership functions. These leadership functions are framing and communicating school goals and monitoring student progress.

Framing and Communicating School Goals

The leadership function of framing and communicating school goals involves creating a mission to drive the work of the entire school. Hallinger (2005) emphasized the importance of establishing a vision and mission and communicating it to stakeholders. During the PoP project, one of the tasks given to the assistant principals in part one of the district template was the identification of a project topic. During this phase of the PoP project, assistant principals evaluated multiple sources of data and created questions for discussion about this information with their Level II committees. The work of each assistant principal in this first part of the PoP project was focused specifically on framing their problem correctly so that they could work with

their Level II committees to develop a possible solution to implement through their action plans. Ultimately, each assistant principal identified a PoP project topic with their committees and began the process of communicating the importance of this topic with relevant stakeholders at their schools.

The skill of identifying and framing a problem of practice within each assistant principals' local context can be improved through problem-based learning (Copland, 2000; Edens, 2000). Because assistant principals could not progress in their PoP projects without correctly framing their problem, the PoP project for this study provided an opportunity for growth in this leadership function from the theoretical framework. The literature on PBL supports this aspect of the PoP project as an opportunity for leadership growth. Copland (2000) and Griswold (2006) found that repeated exposure to PBL affected the ability of learners to frame problems and identify possible solutions. Further, the work performed by the assistant principals in framing and identifying a problem agrees with the literature that suggests that PBL supports critical thinking skills for administrators who use it as part of preparation for the principalship (Akin, 2010; Griswold, 2006; Hallinger & Bridges, 2007; Karabatak & Turhan, 2017; Tanner et. al., 1995).

The two cases reviewed for action plan implementation provide some insight about the growth opportunity provided in this leadership function. Stephanie's decision to integrate her action plan and her school improvement plan allowed her to frame the central problem of her PoP project as a mission for the entire school. Therefore, her PoP project focus on MTSS implementation became the focus for faculty meetings, professional development, and discussions with individual teachers and students. Stephanie had repeated exposure to her PoP project topic because she had to communicate it consistently to her stakeholders and follow up

on their progress. This placed Stephanie in an excellent position to develop her leadership through PBL as described in the literature.

In contrast, Jamie's decision not to integrate her action plan into her school improvement plan kept her from the same opportunities for growth in this leadership function. Her focus on creating non-negotiables and establishing procedures came at the expense of opportunities to communicate her mission to the entire school. Had Jamie made her PoP project topic the central problem of the entire school, she would have been able to focus her attention and resources on why her new procedures and expectations were important. Instead, she was only able to communicate the importance of her progress monitoring plan to her guidance counselors. Unfortunately, they did not have sufficient buy-in for her action plan to be executed effectively.

Monitoring Student Progress

Stephanie and Jamie's PoP projects were focused on monitoring the progress of students in order to improve their schools' graduation rates. Stephanie's focus was on monitoring her students toward graduation through revised MTSS procedures as described in Chapter Four. Jamie's focus was on creating an improved monitoring process for her guidance counselors to improve student proficiency in Algebra I. Monitoring student progress allows assistant principals to gather relevant data for evaluation of important school goals. Assistant principals often use these data in conversations with stakeholders and to determine goals for school improvement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Thompson, 2011).

A key benefit of monitoring student progress for school leaders is that it can provide the right information at the right time to make important decisions. This leadership function provides a growth opportunity to evaluate students' proficiency on a regular basis (Clayton et. al., 2014; Hallinger, 2000; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). In Stephanie's case, her progress monitoring

system through MTSS was designed to allow groups of teachers to evaluate student data and create timely academic interventions for them through collaborative discussion. For Jamie, her progress monitoring system was designed for her guidance counselors so they could more accurately track students toward high school graduation on the Algebra I end of course exam graduation requirement.

Both PoP project designs provided growth opportunities in this leadership function. However, the focus of their progress monitoring was very different. Stephanie's progress monitoring system was designed for the adults on campus to monitor students and intervene for them. Her system involved a much larger portion of her campus and gave her many opportunities to exercise this leadership function. Jamie's progress monitoring system was intended for her guidance counselors only. Ostensibly, this progress monitoring system was envisioned to provide her guidance counselors a way to accurately track students on Algebra I end of course exam completion. However, Jamie's system was less about students and more about monitoring the work of her small group of guidance counselors. As a result, Jamie did not have the same opportunities for growth in this leadership function as Stephanie if only because the group of stakeholders involved was so much smaller.

Recommendations for District Leaders

This study generated several important findings about the PoP project embedded in the Level II Certification program of Brevard County Public Schools. Based on these findings, I propose the following recommendations to district leaders in order to refine the PoP project for future cohorts of assistant principals in the Level II Certification program: (1) provide specific and detailed training on the district template and each component of the PoP project to every member of the Level II committees; (2) provide clear expectations, in writing, of how assistant

principals are to collaborate with their Level II committees; (3) provide a timeline for completion of each part of the district template; (4) allow assistant principals to increase their meeting frequency with their Level II committees as necessary to complete their PoP projects; and (5) promote the integration of the PoP project into the school improvement planning process with principal support.

The professional development that is currently designed for the Level II Certification program specifies that training is provided only to the cohort of assistant principals selected for the program and their supervising principals. The findings from this study illustrated the miscommunication and lack of support that was caused by insufficient training of all committee members. Therefore, it is important that all Level II committee members receive a detailed and specific training on the four-part district template and on each component of the PoP project. Training on these elements may enable committee members to provide greater support to assistant principals as they work to complete their PoP projects within one school year.

Second, assistant principals in the current study struggled to understand the expectations of the school district with regard to collaboration with their Level II committees during the PoP project. Their confusion created challenges that negatively impacted the creation and implementation of their action plans. Two assistant principals in the cohort were not able to develop an action plan by the end of the year as a result of these challenges. In the future, I recommend that the school district add specific instructions into the Level II Certification program manual for assistant principals admitted to the program. These instructions should make clear that the PoP project is intended to be a collaborative endeavor between the assistant principals and their Level II committees. The critical role of collaboration is supported by the PBL literature (Bridges, 1989, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1993, 1995, 1997; Copland, 2000;

Ford et. al., 1997), and it is important for the school district to clearly communicate the expectation regarding how assistant principals within the Level II Certification program should collaborate with their Level II committee members.

Third, this study illustrated how assistant principals struggled to stay on track throughout their PoP projects. The challenges that were present in the program for this first cohort of assistant principals led them to address other components of their Level II Certification programs before the PoP project. To address this problem, I recommend that the school district provide a timeline to the assistant principals in the program. This timeline should include project completion goals for each quarter of the school year and a deadline for project completion in relation to the other components of the Level II Certification program. The research literature on PBL supports the use of timelines in projects of this nature (Bridges, 1992; Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Edens, 2000; Limerick, Clarke & Daws, 1997), so providing one within the Level II Certification program may help assistant principals be more successful in completing their PoP projects over the course of the school year.

Fourth, some assistant principals within this study struggled with the infrequent schedule of meetings with their Level II committees. Two of the six assistant principals in the Level II cohort were not able to create an action plan for their projects. They blamed this failure, in part, on not receiving guidance from their committee members when they needed it in order to move to the next part of the PoP project template. More flexibility with the meeting schedule would allow assistant principals to set their own schedule based on their own needs within the program. Therefore, I recommend that the school district allow the assistant principals within the Level II Certification program to determine the frequency of their meeting schedule with the members of their Level II committees while still respecting the district guidelines about the minimum number

of meetings per year. Further, I recommend that assistant principals within the Level II Certification program be allowed the flexibility to hold meetings through video conferencing when members of their committees cannot be physically present at a meeting location. The 70-mile length of the Brevard Public School district creates logistical challenges for committee members to travel to meetings. Allowing more flexible meeting options may result in better attendance and member participation.

Finally, the research literature recognizes that managerial duties often monopolize the time of assistant principals at the expense of opportunities to develop instructional leadership (Armstrong, 2012; Clayton, 2014; Gurley et. al., 2015; Marshall & Greenfield, 1987; Oleszewski et. al., 2012; Oliver, 2005; Pellicer et. al., 1988; Sun & Shoho, 2017). With many responsibilities to manage on a daily basis, assistant principals may benefit from consolidating duties into more manageable tasks. A major finding of this study in Chapter Four was that integrating the action plan for the PoP project into the state-mandate school improvement plan created a more efficient system in which to work and provided more opportunities for leadership growth. Therefore, I recommend that district leaders promote the integration of the PoP project into the school improvement planning process. District leaders should also communicate this opportunity to supervising principals so they may support the integration of these two processes. Principal support of this process is essential since integration of the PoP project into the school improvement plan cannot happen without their approval. This recommendation would encourage assistant principals to begin part one of their PoP project in the summer months as data analysis is conducted for school improvement planning. This would provide at least one additional month to complete the PoP project. It would also allow assistant principals to marshal resources on a school-wide basis for their PoP projects, including funding for these initiatives

from their School Advisory Councils. Otherwise, the PoP project becomes an additional duty for very busy assistant principals with no clear source of funding to accomplish its goals.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The findings from this study were informed by the PBL literature and revealed the experiences of the first cohort of assistant principals who participated in the PoP project as part of the Level II Certification program of Brevard County Public Schools. Before concluding this chapter, it is important to identify the limitations of this study and the possible directions for future research to overcome these limitations.

First although every assistant principal in the Level II Certification program participated in the study, the results are not generalizable due to the small population and the research methods utilized. In addition, due to the challenges experienced in this program, only four assistant principals provided data on action plan implementation. Future research is necessary at the district level to expand on the findings of this study. This research should explore the experiences and perceptions of a larger group of assistant principals who will go through the Level II Certification program and implement the PoP project within the school district.

Second, data collection was limited to only two semesters due to the scope of the study to investigate the first year of the Level II Certification program. Since the Level II Certification program is designed to be completed over two years, it is important for future studies to examine how the second PoP project is implemented differently than the first PoP project reported in this study. There are many lessons learned from the first year of implementation, and it is likely that the second year of PoP project implementation would look different from the first year.

Finally, future research should attempt to understand how learners who engage in PBL as part of their principal preparation program grow in their capacity as instructional leaders over

time. Future research should also examine the impacts of a PBL project regarding the growth of leadership knowledge and skills. The current study could not examine how assistant principals developed their instructional leadership as a result of the PoP project due to the major challenges with implementation discussed previously. Given the promise of a PBL approach in developing instructional leadership among assistant principals, there is a need to examine whether and how a PBL program, such as the PoP project, contributes to professional learning and growth of important aspects of instructional leadership.

Summary

This qualitative case study explored how assistant principals identified specific problems of practice, identified focus questions, and created an action plan within the PoP project of Brevard County Public Schools Level II Certification program. It also examined how two assistant principals implemented their action plans and the factors that explained the differences in implementation. This study revealed that assistant principals in the Level II Certification program faced several major challenges that negatively impacted their ability to complete their PoP projects. These included confusion about district expectations, a lack of guidance from their Level II committee members, and major delays in PoP project implementation. The study found that integration of the action plan for the PoP project into the state-mandated school improvement plan provided a more efficient system for assistant principals to implement their projects. Further, the study identified leadership position and orientation as factors that seem to explain the differences in action plan implementation.

The theoretical framework for this study was taken from Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) research on instructional leadership. Analysis of the data indicated that two assistant principals' approaches to implementing their action plans may provide opportunities for leadership growth

in two of the eight leadership functions within their framework. These leadership functions were framing and communicating school goals and monitoring student progress. Differences in action plan implementation helped to frame the discussion about how leadership growth opportunities may vary in these two functions.

The results of this study informed recommendations to district leaders for future cohorts of their Level II Certification program. The school district should consider improving their training and instructions to all participants within the Level II Certification program in order to promote better understanding of their expectations and the components of the PoP project. Flexibility should be provided to assistant principals to schedule Level II committee meetings according to their needs. Finally, the school district should consider promoting the integration of the action plan component in part three of their PoP project template with the existing state-mandated school improvement planning process in order to promote smoother project implementation.

APPENDIX A

FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me a little about your leadership journey and what brought you to apply for the Level II Certification program.
2. How would you describe your leadership style or practice?
3. What experiences did you have in your leadership positions that made you want to train to become a school principal?
4. What experience did you have with instructional leadership prior to applying for the Level II Certification program?
5. The district Strategic Plan focuses on early childhood literacy, Algebra I proficiency, college & career readiness, and graduation rate? Thinking about your own school, do any of these pose a problem that you could impact during your Level II program?
6. Let's take the category you just selected. Can you describe specifically what you see as a problem at your school?
7. How do the members of your Level II committee help you identify a problem of practice to solve at your school?
8. The categories in the Strategic Plan are rather broad. How do you think you might go about developing a few questions to really focus your work toward developing a solution to the problem at your school?
9. How do the members of your Level II committee help you refine your focus questions?
10. What are the steps you take to develop a plan of action to help you investigate your focus questions?

11. How do the members of your Level II committee help you refine your action plan? How do they follow up with you on your progress?
12. How would you describe your current leadership practices with framing and communicating school goals?
13. How would you describe your current leadership practices with supervising and evaluating instruction in your school?
14. How would you describe your current leadership practices with coordinating the curriculum at your school?
15. How would you describe your current leadership practices with setting academic expectations for the teachers at your school?
16. How would you describe your current leadership practices with monitoring student progress at your school?
17. How would you describe your current leadership practices with leading professional development at your school?
18. How would you describe your current leadership practices with protecting instructional time for your teachers and students?
19. How do you currently develop incentives for your teachers and students so they perform at their highest level?

APPENDIX B

SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What challenges did you experience as you implemented your action plan?
2. How did you overcome challenges you faced while implementing your action plan?
3. Did you determine what success with your problem of practice would look like when you began the process? If so, how did you define successful implementation?
4. What successes did you experience while implementing your action plan?
5. What did you learn about your own leadership practices while you worked to identify a problem of practice for your program?
6. What did you learn about your own leadership practices while you developed focus questions for your problem of practice?
7. What did you learn about your own leadership practices while you created an implementation plan for your problem of practice?
8. Do you believe your ability as an instructional leader has changed as a result of working through a problem of practice? If so, how?
9. How have your leadership abilities changed with framing and communicating school goals after working through a problem of practice?
10. How have your leadership abilities changed with supervising and evaluating instruction?
11. How have your leadership abilities changed with coordinating curriculum at your school?
12. How have your leadership abilities changed with setting academic expectations for the teachers at your school?
13. How have your leadership abilities changed with monitoring student progress at your school?

14. How have your leadership abilities changed with leading professional development at your school?
15. How have your leadership abilities changed with protecting instructional time for your teachers and students?
16. How have your leadership abilities changed with developing incentives for your teachers and students?
17. What recommendations would you make to district leaders about improving the problem of practice activity within the Level II Certification program?
18. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience working through a problem of practice at your school?

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM FOR STUDY PARTICIPATION

My name is Chad Kirk and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Florida State University. You have been selected to participate in this study because you are enrolled in your school district's Level II Certification program. Please read this form in its entirety before providing your consent to participate in the study.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate how job-embedded problems of practice prepare you for instructional leadership as a school principal. The data from this study will be used to improve training for administrators in our school district.

Data Collection: Data will be collected from three sources: (1) Two semi-structured interviews with you during the first semester of the 2018-2019 school year. Each interview will be conducted face to face and will last approximately 60 minutes; (2) Artifacts about your problem of practice from your Level II Certification binder; (3) Observations of your Level II committee meetings where your problem of practice is discussed.

Risks and Benefits: There are minimal risks associated with the study. The risks associated with participating are not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine examinations or tests. There are no benefits to you if you participate in the study.

Compensation: No compensation will be provided for participation in the study.

Confidentiality: The records from this study will be kept confidential by the researcher and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research. Pseudonyms will be used in the final research report to protect your anonymity. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. You may also discontinue your participation at any time.

You may contact me with questions about the study. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,
James C. Kirk, M.S.
Florida State University

I have read the description of "*Developing Instructional Leadership: Level II Certification for Assistant Principals*" and I agree to be a participant in the study.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

APPENDIX D

FSU IRB APPROVAL LETTER



Office of the Vice President for Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 07/17/2018

To: James Kirk [REDACTED]

Address: [REDACTED]

Dept.: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Developing Instructional Leadership: A Case of Level II Certification for Assistant Principals

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 07/16/2019 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Marytza Gawlik <mgawlik@fsu.edu>, Advisor
HSC No. 2018.25190

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

James C. Kirk was born in Kentucky, raised in southwestern Virginia, and has lived in Florida for the last 33 years. He attended Florida State University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and a Bachelor of Science degree in Social Science Education. After graduation, James returned home and began teaching history for Brevard Public Schools in Brevard County, Florida. After seven years of teaching, James entered graduate school in 2003 at Nova Southeastern University. He earned a Master of Science degree in Educational Leadership and made the decision to pursue an administrative career. James began his administrative career as an assistant principal for Brevard Public Schools in 2004. Over the last sixteen years, James has served the school district as an assistant principal at two different middle schools, a middle school principal, and as a high school principal. As a school principal, James is dedicated to maintaining a collaborative school culture in which professionals work together to solve learning problems for students. He believes strongly in breaking down barriers in order to provide opportunity to students. James is a member of the Brevard Association of School Administrators, National Association of School Administrators, and Florida Association of School Administrators. Recently, he was honored by the Florida Music Educators Association (FMEA) as their 2020 Administrator of the Year for the State of Florida.