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A GROUNDED THEORY QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

by

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ABSTRACT

A GROUNDED THEORY QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

Mary Frances Hardesty
Old Dominion University, 2021
Chair, Dr. Karen Sanzo

Assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders are an essential component of educational reform. Continued state and federal accountability for improved student learning requires promoting assistant principals beyond managerial duties toward increased supervision as instructional leaders. Unfortunately, administrators at the high school level frequently lack content knowledge in the areas they supervise. A critical analysis of the position was needed knowing assistant principals are influential in the teaching and learning process. The first research question determined how and in what ways assistant principals who supervised instruction at the high school level made sense of their position dependent upon whether they were highly qualified in the content areas they supervised. The second research question acknowledged the lived experiences of participants and gained insight of their perspectives related to the relationship between their content area base of expertise and their self-efficacy around supervising both familiar and unfamiliar content areas. The study included a theoretical framework of instructional leadership with an emphasis on content as well as a conceptual framework of self-efficacy.

The methods used to complete the study incorporated a grounded theory qualitative approach to include purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Participant recruitment was based on specified criteria of high school assistant principals who supervised instruction. Each participant engaged in an interview with the researcher where data collected from all contributors

were thoroughly analyzed by using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The overall findings interconnected with the literature revealed three major categories of consideration. The first category was the ability of the assistant principal to balance the roles and responsibilities associated with the position. The second category addressed the influence of having a highly qualified status in relation to being a content-focused instructional leader. The final category included self-efficacy of the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader. The conclusion highlights the necessity to impart supports to enhance an assistant principal's ability to become a competent content-focused instructional leader. Furthermore, future research of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders is necessary as it has the potential to positively influence teacher professional growth and overall student learning.

Keywords: content-focused instructional leadership, assistant principal, self-efficacy

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I dedicate my dissertation to my brother, James E. Hiter, Jr., who gave me the courage and strength to persevere as I watched him battle lung cancer. He is my hero and I admire him for his outlook on life to live each and every day to the fullest and fulfill the dreams you set out to accomplish.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The pressure of state and federal accountability for improved student learning is an ongoing topic of discussion. The American public school system is recognized for the commonality of curriculum adopted among states, yet improving instruction is challenging unless the proper support and resources are in place (Mette & Riegel, 2018). A school leader's energy is often focused on instruction because structuring an organization to meet increased teaching and learning demands is difficult, especially at the high school level (Lochmiller, 2016; Louis et al., 2010; Timperley, 2005). Assistant principals often have oversight of content-focused instruction, promoting the same influence as the building principal regarding mandated changes related to educational reform (Searby et al., 2017). Content-focused instructional leadership at the high school level encompasses supervision of departmentalized content areas where each is recognized as an individual network within the larger organization.

Administrators play a significant role as they influence instruction; understanding the perceptions of assistant principals as middle leaders in this role is crucial. The assistant principal in the position as a middle leader is often perceived as a mediator between teachers and the building principal. Hence, an assistant principal's supervision of instruction supports teacher growth through systematic instructional change (Mendels, 2012; Steele et al., 2015). Assistant principals are accountable not only for managerial duties, but also oversight of instruction. The ability for school districts to design infrastructures to support educational reform efforts for instruction is key (Hopkins et al., 2013). Content-focused leadership of instruction is not only a heightened focus of school improvement, but also has gained significance on the political scale (Kwan, 2016; Mendels, 2012).

Research Problem

District expectations that assistant principals serve as content-focused instructional leadership implies structured reasoning about the awareness of their various roles and responsibilities. Attention focused on instructional oversight of specific content areas, especially at the high school level, is influential in understanding effective school leadership (Carraway & Young, 2015; Mendels, 2012; Neumerski et al., 2018; Rigby, 2014; Steele et al., 2015). Although assistant principals are influential in the overall teaching and learning process, a critical examination of their position related to content-focused instructional leadership is important to provide future guidance and direction. Hassenpflug (2013) suggests content-focused instructional leaders need an in-depth awareness of both content knowledge and pedagogy. Unfortunately, assistant principals frequently lack content knowledge and their undergraduate degree limits the boundaries of the academic subjects they supervise at the high school level (Hassenpflug, 2013; Steele et al., 2015). They are often challenged in their role as a content-focused instructional leader due to the departmentalized nature of high schools (Lochmiller, 2016).

More research is necessary to understand the needs of the assistant principal position if they are expected to make a significant impact on teaching and learning (Petrides et al., 2014). My study focused on finding out how and in what ways assistant principals at the high school level make sense of their position depending upon whether they were highly qualified in the subject area(s) they supervised. I also explored how selected assistant principals' content knowledge, or lack thereof, affected their ability to serve as a content-focused instructional leaders. Although the role of the assistant principal remains bound to clerical and managerial duties, the current position is now expanded into one of supervision, instructional leadership, and

curriculum development and implementation (Mattocks, 2016). Minimal research exists on the content-focused instructional responsibilities of assistant principals (Celikten, 2001). Knowledge gained from learned experiences of practicing assistant principals imparts an awareness of the position and the supports and resources necessary for success. Therefore, there is a need to further advance research about assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders for the purpose of preparing, leading, and supporting those in the position.

Because research focused on overall instructional improvement has been neglected, much remains to be learned about content-focused instructional leadership to improve teaching and learning (Neumerski, 2012; Stein & Nelson, 2003). Lochmiller (2016) argued research on content-focused leadership at the secondary level is sparse, as is literature revealing content-specific strategies used to influence leadership practice. There is a practical need to understand what experiences are necessary to support assistant principals as instructional leaders in high schools so they can make a positive contribution to the teaching and learning process (Celiken, 2001). Most assistant principals enter and remain in the position with lack of formal training related to the content of the subjects they supervise (Mercer, 2016). When placed in a high school setting, a supervisor's self-efficacy has the potential to directly influence their performance in multiple ways.

Purpose Statement

Regardless of whether they exhibit effective leadership practices, some will be encouraged to step into roles related to supervision of instruction of specific content areas (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Mattocks, 2016). Research to expand the knowledge of the assistant principal as an instructional leader is essential because the position is evolving to require the middle space leader to act as a catalyst for change (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016; Mattocks,

2016; Muñoz & Barber, 2011; Searby & Armstrong; 2016). The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of assistant principals who supervised instruction at the high school level, particularly based on whether they were highly qualified in the specific content areas they supervised. Current assistant principals described their personal encounters regarding the successes and challenges they experienced within their position.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

I applied a theoretical framework of instructional leadership and a conceptual framework of self-efficacy. There was a direct emphasis on content knowledge of assistant principals acting as instructional leaders supervising various subjects at the high school level. I also considered participants' self-efficacy related to their level of self-confidence over the content areas they supervised. The overall objective of the study was to understand the experiences of selected assistant principals and explore their values and beliefs related to supervision of instruction in various content areas. The intent of the study was to determine the influential factors and critical components to consider when aligning content-focused instructional leadership with teaching and learning of middle leaders.

Research Methodology

The research design of the study was a grounded theory approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I used purposive and snowball sampling with set criteria established to gain participants to interview for the study. Selected assistant principals who supervised instruction were interviewed to provide descriptions of their practice as part of the data collection and analysis process. Perspectives of all participants supported the need for increased research related to assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders at the high school level.

Research Questions

I developed two research questions to assist in the overall understanding of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. First: How, and in what ways, do assistant principals supervising instruction at the high school level make sense of their position, depending upon whether they are highly qualified in the content area? And second: What is the relationship between an assistant principal's content area base of expertise and their self-efficacy around supervising a specific content area? Exploring these questions assisted in better understanding the role of assistant principal based on their personal values and beliefs related to their ability to lead instruction at the high school level. Additionally, the use of a grounded theory approach allowed me to uncover interpretations during the data collection and analysis phase, constructing a theory centered around content-focused instructional leadership.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study was to explore the underlying themes and connections developed when speaking to assistant principals who carry management roles yet also function as content-focused instructional leaders. Limited knowledge around assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders indicates a need for additional research in this area. The role of the assistant principal in providing leadership within the school has been largely overlooked (Mattocks, 2016). Overall, literature on assistant principals is minimal; research of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders is virtually non-existent (Celikten, 2001; Searby & Armstrong, 2016). The assistant principal plays a pivotal leadership role in the school, but the position is under-researched and rarely addressed in detail (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2014).

Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations of the study included enough time to capture interviews based on a partial semester of a school year in addition to completing interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic. The data collection process was also limited by the non-probability techniques used to select and interview participants. Only 16 total participants were included in the study and there were no set criteria of the number of years one needed in the assistant principal position to be part of the study. Based on using purposive and snowball sampling, the participants ranged from those with minimal experience those with many years in the field. The purpose of this study was to inform both leadership preparation programs, school districts, and policy makers about the training and support necessary for assistant principals to become effective instructional leaders at the high school level. The study provided participants an opportunity to respond to the interview questions in an open and honest manner. Participants' responses reflect the reality of the assistant principal position and suggest aspects of professional growth necessary for the overall goal of improving teaching and learning at the high school level.

Definition of Terms

It is helpful to define terms so readers have a common understanding of how they are used in this study. *Instructional leadership* is direct involvement of a school leader in teaching and learning processes promoting the success of all students (Shaked, 2018; Shaked et al., 2017). Instructional leadership is closely aligned with student engagement behaviors, classroom management, and organizational procedures; *content-focused instructional leadership* is described as a leader effectively identifying and aligning teaching strategies and pedagogy within the context of individual specific content areas (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020; Desimone et al., 2006; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Content-focused instructional leadership encompasses an

understanding of "questioning strategies, effective lesson structures, where potential misconceptions in student understanding may lie, …[and] the ability to track the substance of students' classroom discourse to discern how and whether learning is occurring in alignment with the content field's expectations" (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020, p. 274). Content-focused instructional leadership stresses a need for administrators to understand content knowledge associated with a given subject area as well as the ability to identify ways to integrate the teaching and learning process for students and teachers (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Research related to content knowledge as a major focus of instructional leadership is minimal (Cunningham & Lochmiller, 2020).

Two other key terms are also necessary to recognize. First, *self-efficacy* is the belief someone has about their own ability and their internal perseverance to accomplish a goal (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Schunk, 2016). Self-efficacy is closely related to an assistant principal's self-confidence in their ability to perform as a content-focused instructional leader. Finally, I also use the term *highly qualified*. "The federal law defines a highly qualified teacher as a teacher who is fully licensed by the state, has at least a bachelor's degree and has demonstrated competency in each subject taught" (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2020, para. 1).

The remainder of the study is organized into four additional chapters, a reference section, and appendices. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature related to assistant principals as instructional leaders and how self-efficacy plays a role in their performance. Chapter 3 includes an explanation of the research design and method of the study. The discussion of the findings is presented in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 provides an overall summary of the study, a synopsis of the major findings, findings as they relate to the research, implications for assistant principals

as content-focused instructional leaders and for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Schools in the United States are under a considerable amount of pressure to improve student achievement (Boston et al., 2017). The role of school leader has changed immensely and the assistant principal position is one fundamentally impacting school effectiveness (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sanzo, 2017). Increased demands from federal, state, and local authorities have created a need to recruit, hire, and retain assistant principals capable of taking on varied roles and responsibilities (Sun & Shoho, 2017). It is important for schools to meet the challenges of educational reform, leadership preparation, development, and ongoing support of assistant principals (Levine, 2005; Ng & Chan, 2014). Fusarelli et al. (2018) suggested that increased demands to perform as instructional leaders due to pressures of accountability have made understanding the role of the assistant principal crucial.

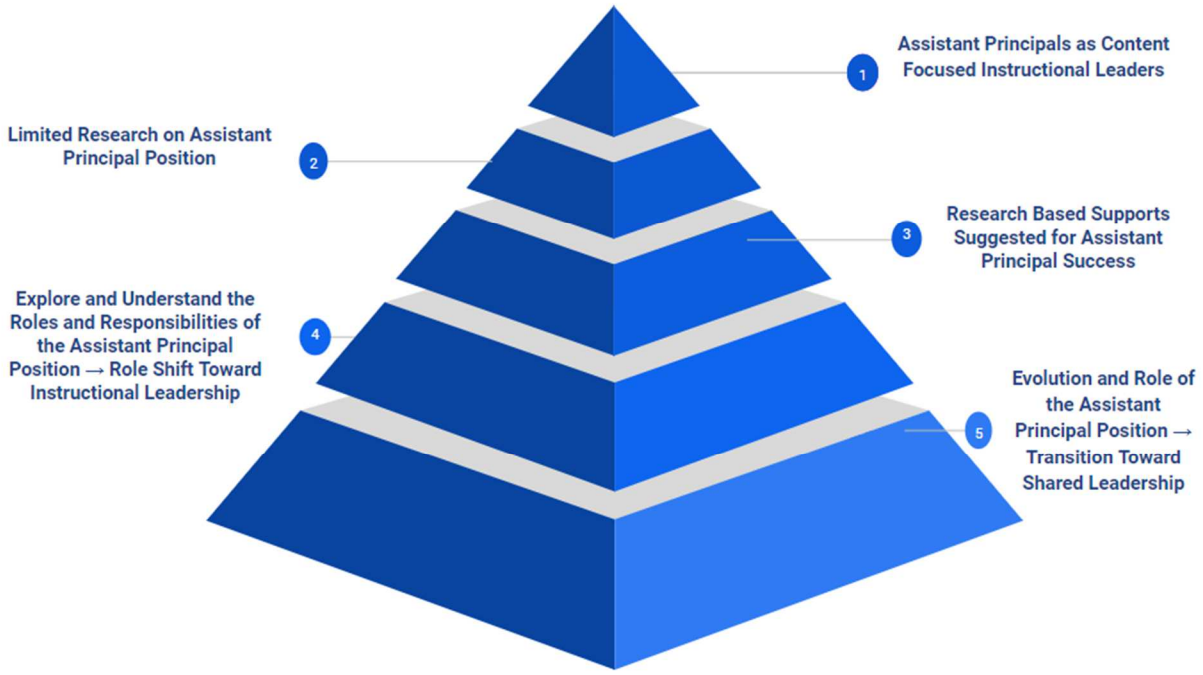
The assistant principal position is multi-faceted. Oleszewski et al. (2012) suggested identifying criteria to clearly define the role of the position. To prepare assistant principals, understanding the role is crucial for success (Mattocks, 2016). While the role is typically overlooked, underutilized, and under researched, recognizing the importance of the position will inform educational practice (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017). Future research is necessary to hear the voices of middle leaders and how they impact instruction (Mattocks, 2016).

The ever-changing role of the assistant principal makes middle management in the field of education an essential issue to study (Ng & Chan, 2014). Knowledge of the assistant principal position is critical in understanding the central role they play in collaboratively shaping the overall learning conditions within the school (McKenzie & Varney, 2018). Ultimately, the middle management position of assistant principal is becoming more complex in the undertaking

of transforming schools in the 21st century (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Figure 1 illustrates the progression of the assistant principal position, beginning with the evolution of the original job description at the base of the pyramid. This visual representation highlights an upward pattern of job transformation including recent educational reforms where assistant principals are currently viewed as content-focused instructional leaders at the high school level.

Figure 1

Assistant Principal Transition Toward Content-Focused Instructional Leadership



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Evolution and Role of the Assistant Principal Position

The assistant principal position was created to support the many responsibilities held by the principal of the school. The first examples of an assistant to the principal occurred as early as 1699, when Ezekial Cheever, schoolmaster of the Boston Latin Grammar School, hired and paid an assistant due to the increased number of students and responsibilities in his school (Parker &

Parker, 1996). In the early 1800s, there was a focus on structured leadership in schools; therefore, the role of *head teacher* was created and named as the predecessor of the principal position (Goodwin et al., 2005; Rousmaniere, 2007). The mid-19th century led to organizational development in schools where students were classified by age and achievement, bringing about a need for the first principal position (Rousmaniere, 2007). The late-19th century into the early 20th saw a further shift, from the superintendent as the direct supervisor of operations to the school principal due to the growing complexity within the school environment (Glanz, 1994; Rousmaniere, 2007). The principal became a middle manager between the school and the district and reported as needed to the superintendent (Goodwin et al., 2005; Rousmaniere, 2007).

Although the building leader was a prominent feature within the educational system, other supervisory roles were also integrated to support the many responsibilities assumed of the principal (Glanz, 1994). *Special supervisors*, typically females who supported less experienced teachers, and *general supervisors*, usually males to assist with the logistical management of the school, were selected to support the work of the principal (Glanz, 1994). The position of general supervisor, eventually termed *assistant principal*, emerged in response to increased principal duties (Glanz, 1994; Mertz, 2006). Ultimately, the special supervisor position vanished in the early 1930s and the general supervisor remained a primary position (Glanz, 1994). The relationship between the principal and general supervisor as the primary assistant to the principal hindered the perception of the assistant principal as an executive figure (Glanz, 1994; Panyako & Rorie, 1987).

Today, intense pressure is placed on administrators to increase overall student achievement on standardized assessments (Boston et al., 2017; Mercer, 2016). Accountability expectations suggest building-level principals know how to supervise instructional programs

within their schools, resulting in overall increased student outcomes (Searby et al., 2017). Historically, the assistant principal position was rarely seen as one inclusive of instructional responsibility; however, changes in the education system have transformed school leadership roles (Glanz, 1994; Panyako & Rorie, 1987). The expanding role of the assistant principal position to include instructional leadership suggests a need to revisit the roles of those who support the teaching and learning process (Glanz, 1994). Development of a collaborative effort of the principal and assistant principal through a relationship of trust creates an opportunity for the principal to impart a vision of shared leadership.

Transformation Toward Shared Leadership

School improvement lends itself to a team approach based on the demands of increased student achievement (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Doos et al. (2018) found shared leadership to involve collective responsibility of the organization as well as a shift in influence among leaders. Shared leadership responsibility among members of the organization increases trust and teamwork as the assistant principal becomes a facilitator (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). In an era of increased accountability, the assistant principal is an asset to a distributed form of leadership (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016). Collective leadership and shared responsibility bring about a sense of reassurance and reduce feelings of isolation (Doos et al., 2018). Hilliard and Newsome (2013) suggested principals position themselves as distributive leaders by sharing instructional leadership and supervision roles with assistant principals.

The main goal for shared leadership is to establish a vision of how to lead effectively by reliance on others in their position (Doos et al., 2018). Hilliard and Newsome (2013) stressed the importance of knowing the talents, skills, strengths, and knowledge of those involved in the shared leadership process. Principals play an important role in developing assistant principals

and entrusting them in the shared leadership process to reach school improvement goals (Barnett et al., 2017). Distributed leadership provides an interactive way of sharing responsibility, collectively overcoming barriers, coordinating work tasks, reducing the workload, better development of ideas and decisions, and minimizing isolation among principals and assistant principals as they work together (Doos et al., 2018).

Assistant principals outnumber principals (Armstrong, 2015). The assistant principal helps building principals, who are expected to improve overall student achievement (Gurley et al., 2015; Militello et al., 2015). The assistant principal position provides critical support to drive overall improvement of the school (Mercer, 2016). The middle management position establishes a link between the principal and the teachers based on organizational hierarchy (Ng & Chan, 2014; Petrides et al., 2014). The job encompasses various responsibilities within the school, including both managerial and instructional roles (Barnett et al., 2012). Typically, the principal assigns duties to the assistant principal aligning with the school's vision, mission, and goals, incorporating aspects of both managerial and instructional responsibilities.

Although assistant principals have multiple responsibilities, realistically they serve as an assistant to the principal (Barnett et al., 2017; Muñoz & Barber, 2011). The position involves a blend of both operational and instructional duties (Gurley et al., 2015; Hausman et al., 2002; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2014). Although the assistant principal works closely with the principal to handle both management and instruction, it is important to develop a clear picture of what most consumes their time (Hausman et al., 2002; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Assistant principal roles and responsibilities are rarely addressed in detail and middle managers are usually overstretched in their jobs based on the vast array of duties assigned (Cranston et al., 2004; McKenzie & Varney, 2018). Oleszewski et al. (2012) suggested the development of a

specified criteria to clearly define the role of the position. Understanding the expectations associated with the position is important for comprehending the aspects of leadership connected to the assistant principalship.

Explore and Understand the Assistant Principal Position

The assistant principal position is complex and generally the first position as an administrative leader (Mercer, 2016; Searby et al., 2017). A novice leader brings with them classroom experience and graduate level training in which responsibilities of the role are minimally addressed (Mercer, 2016). New to the profession, novice leaders are trusted to understand classroom teachers' needs and are held responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the school (Mercer, 2016). Pressure placed on assistant principals and the lack of a defined job description can impede the professional growth of the leader. Armstrong (2015) argued that newly hired administrators prepared for the administrative role typically struggle with the social and emotional aspects accompanying their transition from teaching into entry level administration.

Common Roles and Responsibilities

The complexity of the assistant principal position and the controversies of the role in times of school reform create a need to explore the position further (Hausman et al., 2002). No set of best practices or models of how the job is performed exists for the assistant principal position (Muñoz & Barber, 2011). The ways assistant principals envision a realistic job description and what they are actually expected to do can bring about barriers hindering their effectiveness (Cranston et al., 2004). As a result, the assistant principal is often underutilized in schools (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Barnett et al. (2017) suggested assistant principals are an

invaluable resource for schools and "good assistant principals are worth their weight in gold" (p. 286). Assistant principals who are appropriately supported can be part of positive change.

The assistant principal is assigned a diverse set of roles extending from managerial tasks to oversight of instruction. Typical roles of the assistant principal include hall, bus, and cafeteria duty; handling student discipline; monitoring attendance, assemblies, and after school activities; and completing office work (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Shore & Walshaw, 2018). In many cases, the assistant principal has deeper interactions with students than the principal (Hausman et al., 2002). This is partly due to their role as chief disciplinarian and operational manager of the school (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Although there have been educational changes over time, the role of the assistant principal over student management remains constant (Hausman et al., 2002).

Although assistant principal roles vary, Mercer (2016) found continuous pressure associated with the position where the reality of the extensive amount of duties is not prioritized. Ideally the assistant principal embraces not only managerial tasks, but also leadership tasks (Cranston et al., 2004). Despite the assistant principal existing as a key player in the overall operations of the school, there are differences in the perceptions of assistant principals and principals based on their individual roles (Houchens et al., 2018). Houchens et al. (2018) indicated that tension could arise between principals and assistant principals if their job description is not properly addressed. Cranston et al. (2004) found the term *assistant* implied a dependent role of another individual, such as the principal. When both become collectively responsible, a change toward shared leadership reshapes this perspective. The overall result embraces the ability to work collaboratively toward achieving organizational goals and improving working conditions for all (Doos et al., 2018).

Role Shift Toward Instructional Oversight

The role of assistant principal looks vastly different now than it has in the past. Hausman et al. (2002) suggests increased accountability calling for reform in terms of instructional leadership. Demands of schools to perform at higher levels reveals the need for improved teaching and learning to promote increased student achievement (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). In addition, principals need to find ways to use the talents of their assistant principals to support the teaching and learning process (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). It can be helpful for the principal to have courageous conversations with assistant principals to determine their strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). In this way, a principal might learn that the assistant principal brings with them various talents previously unknown.

Effective school leaders are essential for school success (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Education has changed immensely due to meeting the demands of accountability and improved school performance; therefore, the role of assistant principal has moved beyond operational tasks to include becoming an instructional leader (Barnett et al., 2012; Gurley et al., 2015; Militello et al., 2015). Rather than merely taking the burden off the principal and assisting as a school manager, the assistant principal has become an integral leader of instruction (Hausman et al., 2002; Ng & Chan, 2014; Petrides et al., 2014). The role as instructional leader consists of supervising the instructional program connected to student achievement (Searby et al., 2017). Assistant principals are positioned to provide support and encouragement to those they lead and have the potential to enhance the organization in meeting its goals (Urquhart, 2018).

Assistant principals provide opportunities for interactions with both internal and external stakeholders and are sometimes the only interactions these groups have with school administrators (Mercer, 2016). The exchanges often result in success in relationship building

(Mercer, 2016). As a result, the relationships assistant principals develop with teachers provide an opportunity to build trust and becomes a vital component to their instructional role (Hausman et al., 2002). Teachers often work closely with the assistant principal (Mercer, 2016). Furthermore, although the assistant principal role was traditionally filled with duties disassociated from instruction, recent shifts mean those in the position are now challenged with a new set of expectations related to oversight of instruction (Pedrides et al., 2014). Relationships developed between assistant principals and teachers become relevant when they begin to work side-by-side to improve instruction. Shore and Walshaw (2018) found social interaction based on interconnected relationships an important element influencing job satisfaction and an increased sense of belonging. Although the assistant principal has generally held managerial roles and responsibilities, the expectation of becoming an instructional leader is now at the forefront of the job (Searby et al., 2017).

Instructional leadership of assistant principals includes practices such as empowerment, teamwork, and promoting a positive learning environment for those they lead (Duncan, 2018). Shore and Walshaw (2018) argued principals who develop opportunities to share leadership responsibility with assistant principals understand and use their strengths. Principals who make the instructional program a top priority allow assistant principals to step up and lead instruction (Mercer, 2016; Searby et al., 2017). “Assistant principals are individuals that are close to the heart of instruction in most schools and affect a lot of change” (Mercer, 2016, p. 89). Effective leadership of the assistant principal supports teachers through continued professional growth.

Research-Based Support Suggested for Assistant Principal Success

Changes associated with the assistant principal role require new types of support for assistant principals (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016). Because many do not have prior

administrative experience, supports set in place are critical to address the complex tasks associated with the position (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016). Two major areas of support are needed: identifying ways principals successfully integrate shared leadership strategies to assist with organizational and instructional oversight and understanding the need for continued support for the assistant principal role. Ultimately, most assistant principals need guidance to increase their leadership capacity as they take on an active role in the implementation of the school improvement plan (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Addressing the types of support necessary for assistant principal success is critical, especially in a time when instructional leadership is at the forefront of education.

Searby et al. (2017) found that, until recently, the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals had not notably changed over the last 2 decades. The importance of the role of instructional leader has been revealed, yet there have been few mentions of the influence of assistant principals supervising instruction (Searby et al., 2017). Subsequently, research indicates a continuous need for guidance to support assistant principals. Cranston et al. (2004) suggested a change in preparation of the position to include proper training, selection, induction, continued support, and professional development for assistant principals. Despite this need, Searby et al. (2017) found minimal indicators of role-specific preparation prior to novice leaders taking the position.

Completion of a university level administrator preparation program and transitioning into an assistant principal position is typically the first avenue of entry for most assistant principals. These programs familiarize new assistant principals with the various role expectations and responsibilities of the position and can reduce the surprise many novice assistant principals experience (Armstrong, 2015). Minimal influence within a university level administrator

preparation program and gaps of ongoing leadership training hinders the ability to understand the critical elements of the position (Shore & Walshaw, 2018). There is an urgent need for entry level and ongoing support for newly appointed leaders, yet most school districts fail to provide assistant principals with targeted training and support (Armstrong, 2015; Petrides et al., 2014). Lochmiller and Karnopp (2016) stressed the importance of leadership coaching in developing the individual as a leader and supporting the development of all members of the organization.

Successful assistant principals encourage innovation and risk taking and set clear expectations for supporting and leading teachers (Mercer, 2016). Additionally, targeted professional development training allows for differentiation based on specific weaknesses and skill development of identified areas in need of support (Barnett et al., 2017; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Furthermore, mentorship provides opportunities to build relationships and engage in professional discourse toward a commitment to shape the assistant principal experience (Barnett et al. 2017). Through guidance and learning opportunities, assistant principals gain insights for the challenges of the new role (Barnett et al., 2017). The professional learning experiences school districts provide assistant principals influence their ability to become effective leaders.

Valuable knowledge and leadership skills are often obtained when assistant principals experience practical mentoring (Barnett et al., 2017). Mentors are not only veterans with experience, but are also colleagues assistant principals use to seek guidance and support (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Mentors foster a growth mindset by supporting assistant principals as they work through challenges, overcome obstacles, and embrace the position (Barnett et al., 2017). Mercer (2016) suggests collegial interaction is critical for assistant principals' professional growth and wellbeing. Mentors provide multiple insights, including leading

assistant principals through the decision-making process, supporting communication skills, and guiding them with the knowledge they need to address instructional oversight of teaching and learning (Barnett et al., 2017). It is important to give careful consideration to the learning processes intended to develop an assistant principals' leadership skills (Barnett et al., 2017). Insight and navigation of the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional challenges associated with the role is critical for their success (Armstrong, 2015). Although some assistant principals might experience loss from leaving the classroom, both guidance and support are necessary for transition into the administrative position (Armstrong, 2015).

Studies Associated With Role Allocation of the Assistant Principal

Several studies highlight the misalignment of role allocation related to the assistant principal position. Muñoz and Barber (2011) investigated job attributes of assistant principals and found an attraction to the position was the opportunity to focus on instructional leadership over discipline. Other researchers have also mentioned the disconnect of role allocation, finding a majority of assistant principals' time was spent on issues regarding student behavior (Cranston et al., 2004; Hausman et al., 2002). These researchers also addressed concerns about the minimal amount of time allocated to instructional leadership and professional development. Conversely, Houchens et al. (2018) found a positive impact when principals and assistant principals worked in collaboration to influence teacher effectiveness.

It is critical to understand the assistant principal perspectives in existence. Many times the position lacks a precise job description and role classification falls under a description of "duties as assigned by the principal." Cranston et al. (2004) also found a lack of clarity around the assistant principal position based on the reality of the role versus anticipated role expectations. After a qualitative study, Armstrong (2015) reported a cultural shift into the

position as assistant principals addressed feelings of uncertainty where respondent experiences revealed a disconnect between preparation and the reality of the position. Armstrong also found that assistant principals who participated in the study lacked leadership skills necessary to become a middle manager. The stress of the job due to feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and the need for belonging to become an effective leader all play a part in assistant principals' success or failure (Armstrong, 2015). Mentors might be a stronghold to bridge the gap and support assistant principals in the role endeavors of their position. Barnett et al. (2017) suggested professional growth opportunities and mentorship from veteran administrators builds a sense of trust and respect to assist with understanding the position of assistant principal. The shift of role allocation of the assistant principal position toward instructional leadership has created a need for ongoing support.

Understanding what constitutes appropriate preparation of middle leaders to be effective in their position as instructional leaders is imperative. The principal is a key player in redefining the role of the assistant principal (Hausman et al., 2002). Shore and Walshaw (2018) found assistant principals reached the most satisfaction in their jobs when they led the improvement of teaching and learning. Listening to assistant principals' voices will provide valuable insight regarding how to prepare and support them as instructional leaders (Armstrong, 2015). Those ultimately in the trenches have the potential to provide valuable insight to improve the assistant principal position.

Limited Research of the Assistant Principal Position

Research about the assistant principal position is limited. Research on leadership support of the assistant principal position is quite thin; therefore, aspects of leadership coaching are an important area for further study (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016). Due to educational reform, a

considerable amount of research effort has been placed on school-based management, particularly regarding the principal as leader of the building (Cranston et al., 2004). Cranston et al. (2004) suggested other key players in administrative positions (e.g., assistant principals) have not yet been researched to any significant degree. Assistant principals' perceptions as current middle managers within the school have the ability to support knowledge and research of the position (Houchens et al., 2018).

Greater attention paid to the assistant principal role would allow an in-depth understanding of support necessary for success (Shore & Walshaw, 2018). Without such support, assistant principals could experience unnecessarily high levels of stress and anxiety in addition to minimal opportunity for self-reflection (Shore & Walshaw, 2018). Unfortunately, the knowledge base remains inadequate in understanding the critical role of the assistant principal as an educational leader who can affect instruction (Hausman et al., 2002). When assistant principals' voices are heard, school districts, preparation programs, and policymakers will be able to make informed decisions on how to appropriately support these administrators (Armstrong, 2015). Examination of the work life of the assistant principal focused on the instructional leadership role could provide valuable insight for educational improvement (Hausman et al., 2002).

The assistant principal is a valuable resource within a school and the position needs further attention (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). "The paucity of research on the assistant principal as instructional leader is somewhat surprising considering that this position is most often the entry point into school administration" (Searby et al., 2017, p. 398). There is sparse literature on assistant principals because the position has received relatively little attention, especially for assistant principals working in high schools within the United States (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016). Grissom and Loeb (2011) found limited research related to the skills leaders need to

promote school improvement. There is a need for further research aligned with the assistant principal position (Barnett et al., 2017). Mercer (2016) suggested future studies examine characteristics showing how assistant principals reach exemplary levels of performance. There is a need to draw upon the perceptions and experiences of those in the position and how they perform as instructional leaders (Cranston et al., 2004; Shore & Walshaw, 2018).

Instructional Leadership: Theoretical Framework

Instructional leadership involves a deep commitment of a leader promoting the success of all students in the teaching and learning process (Shaked, 2018; Shaked et al., 2017). The definition of instructional leadership embedded in research is expressed in many ways. The overall function of instructional leaders involves an array of behaviors supporting improvement in student learning (Celikten, 2001). "Given their roles as both supporters and evaluators, administrators constitute a critical leverage point in the systematic improvement of instruction" (Stein & Nelson, 2003, p. 425). The role of the administrator as a leader encompasses prioritizing teaching and learning (Neumerski, 2012). Because both principals and assistant principals have become instructional leaders, it is imperative they connect the subject matter they supervise directly to the teaching and learning process (Stein & Nelson, 2003).

Many scholars give similar definitions to instructional leadership. Instructional leadership connects the instructional leader to the instruction itself, prioritizing actions that lead toward improvement of practice (Boston et al., 2017; Dumay et al., 2013; Lochmiller & Acker-Hocevar, 2016; Neumerski, 2012). Support teachers receive as they implement the curriculum contributes to an overall goal of promoting student learning and teacher professional growth (Boston et al., 2017; Dumay et al., 2013; Lochmiller & Acker-Hocevar, 2016; Neumerski, 2012). As such, administrators assume responsibility for identifying teachers' individual learning needs, working

alongside teachers and students throughout the learning journey, and providing adequate resources to enable effective learning to take place (Lochmiller et al., 2012; Stein & Nelson, 2003).

Increased accountability pressures require instructional leaders to focus on continuous school improvement efforts (Searby et al., 2017). Management of an instructional program requires a commitment of collaborative members as they oversee the curriculum and continuously monitor student progress (Shatzer et al., 2014). Despite this need, Koonce et al. (2019) found instructional leaders failing to foster growth due to a misunderstanding of the strategies necessary for success. "The nexus between the complexity of the changing roles of school principals and the accountability movement has created the need to pre-determine principals' capacity to influence the improvement of teaching and learning" (Schrik & Wasonga, 2019, p. 293). Subsequently, instructional leadership as a central force for increased student achievement is only a partial reality (Higgins & Boone, 2011; Shaked, 2018).

Before moving forward with assisting teachers in the process, it is important for instructional leaders to determine what needs to improve (Neumerski, 2012). Instructional leadership is a significant factor in overall school effectiveness (Q. Zheng et al., 2017). Instruction involves ongoing support of the leader as they promote professional growth of each teacher they lead (Reitzug et al., 2008). Essentially, leaders who focus on the quality of instruction based on overall supervision of curricula have the potential to be effective (Mendels, 2012; Q. Zheng et al., 2017). Effective leaders remain involved with the instructional aspects that directly affect student achievement (Shaked, 2018). Credible instructional leaders establish a sense of trust with those around them and consider ways to collaborate with others to improve student learning (Hassenpflug, 2013).

Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Leadership content knowledge is a key characteristic of effectively supporting instruction. Stein and Nelson (2003) described leadership content knowledge as thoroughly understanding the knowledge of an academic subject and how both students and teachers become learners capable of grasping concepts and making connections within and among the content. Ultimately, successful content-focused instructional leaders focus not only on student achievement, but also on the characteristics associated with the teaching and learning of students and teachers (Carraway & Young, 2015). Schrik and Wasonga (2019) suggested school districts struggle when determining whether prospective leaders possess the competencies or have the ability to overcome obstacles as leaders of instruction. The amount of specific content knowledge an instructional leader possesses ultimately influences their role as a content-focused instructional leader (Shaked et al., 2017).

Leadership content knowledge suggests a line of communication where instructional leaders communicate with classroom teachers about their teaching practice (Lochmiller, 2016). Improvement of student learning is visible when the instructional leader supports the relationship between pedagogy and content knowledge (Lochmiller et al., 2012). Effective content-focused instructional leaders involve themselves as active agents of the teaching and learning journey (Katterfeld, 2013). “From knowing a single subject well, administrators will bring to their exploration of the second and third subjects the recognition that every subject has its own domain of exploration” (Carver et al., 2010, p. 32). Because instructional leaders supervise one or multiple subjects at the high school level, it is important they be knowledgeable of the curriculum (Searby et al., 2017). Being open to the discovery of new content areas, possessing

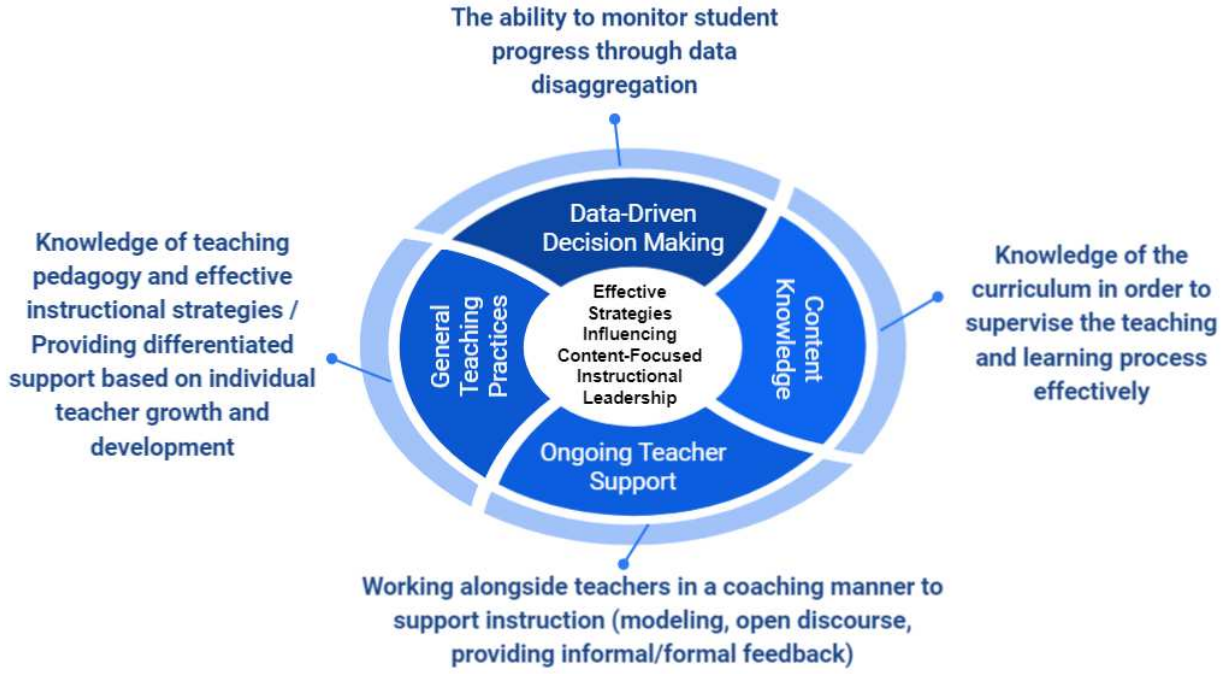
the ability to supervise teaching and learning effectively, and using achievement data to monitor progress are all aspects of a competent instructional leader (Searby et al., 2017).

Effective Strategies Influencing Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Content-focused instructional leadership requires a commitment to make positive change (Shatzer et al., 2014). This involves the leader having some degree of knowledge of the academic subjects they supervise (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Supervising instruction involves providing teachers support aligned with identifying steps of a process toward a desired behavior, where each step builds upon existing steps, while immediate feedback is conveyed throughout (Schunk, 2016). The main goal of instruction is to guide students toward understanding and comprehension of content. Stein and Nelson (2003) suggested "as demands increase…to improve teaching and learning…administrators must be able to know strong instruction when they see it, to encourage it when they don't, and to set the conditions for continuous academic learning" (p. 424). Figure 2 illustrates research-based strategies with the potential to influence content-focused instructional leadership.

Figure 2

Effective Strategies Influencing Content-Focused Instructional Leadership



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Various strategies influence content-focused instructional leadership. These ideas include working alongside teachers to support improvement of instruction, modeling, allowance of risk-taking, and frequent observations paired with formal and informal feedback (Lochmiller, 2016; Lochmiller et al., 2012; Neumerski et al., 2018). If content-focused instructional leaders become engaged in the learning process, their knowledge of high-yield classroom practices is essential for providing meaningful feedback to the teacher (Searby et al., 2017). Additionally, Shatzer et al. (2014) suggested behaviors of content-focused instructional leaders influencing student achievement include monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, and providing incentives for teachers and students during the learning process. Teaching pedagogy, ongoing observation and feedback, monitoring student progress, and protecting time for self-reflection are all effective instructional strategies (Koonce et al., 2019).

When student learning is assessed, both formally and informally, discussion between the content-focused instructional leader and the teacher can regulate alignment of standards, learning objectives, and student performance outcomes (Reitzug et al., 2008). Using student assessment data allows the content-focused instructional leader to lead data-informed conversations about teachers' instructional practice (Lochmiller, 2016). Conversations about individual student needs, performance assessment results, how to use instructional time effectively, and recognizing areas of strength and areas in need of assistance all provide teachers a chance to work with the content-focused instructional leader in a collaborative manner (Shatzer et al., 2014). Moreover, the idea of leaders working alongside teachers on content-focused instruction facilitates appropriate decisions based on school goals (Quong & Walker, 2010). The primary focus of data-driven leadership enhances student learning and provides insight to teachers who may need additional support (Lochmiller, 2016).

The content-focused instructional leader not only identifies potential growth areas of teachers they supervise, but also play a role in the outcome of student performance. These leaders can create an environment where students feel supported and their needs are responded to based on their individual academic performance (Mendels, 2012). Students learn differently; if allowed to progress at their own rate, instruction becomes student centered (Schunk, 2016). Assessment data and reflection informs both teachers and leaders so they can plan instruction focused on individual student learning needs (Timperley, 2005). Boston et al. (2017) suggested a competent academic content leader can identify effective instruction by communicating with the teacher through feedback sessions related to instructional improvement. Unfortunately, a gap exists in research about the ways content-focused instructional leaders use assessment data with and among teachers in specific content areas to support teacher growth and increased student

achievement (Lochmiller, 2016). Content-focused instructional leaders should be knowledgeable about the curriculum they supervise and be able to use data to promote positive instructional decisions (Searby et al., 2017).

Factors Influencing Non-Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Although the intention of a content-focused instructional leader is to guide the teaching and learning process, consideration of the challenges of high school leaders is often overlooked (Timperley, 2005). The expectation suggests the content-focused instructional leader "understand the tenets of quality instruction…[and] have sufficient knowledge of the curriculum to know that appropriate content is being delivered to all students" (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 458). General supervisory behaviors are typically consistent, but obvious differences among the subjects related to content-focused instructional leadership tend to go unnoticed and are usually not recognized (Lochmiller, 2016; Lochmiller et al., 2012). Challenges arise for administrators unfamiliar with specific content areas when they are not highly qualified and it becomes difficult to expect high school assistant principals to provide proper support to all discipline areas (Lochmiller, 2016; Louis et al., 2010). Mendels (2012) suggested secondary schools acknowledge the unreasonable demands of content-focused instructional leaders being responsible for becoming an expert in all academic disciplines.

Ultimately, content-focused instructional leadership practices are hindered by an assistant principal's knowledge of discipline and pedagogy in a particular content area (Shaked et al., 2017). Hassenpflug (2013) found instructional leaders need to feel confident, not apologizing for their lack of knowledge within a specific content area. Limited knowledge of content and the ability to provide focused professional development interfere with the effectiveness of the instructional leader (Carraway & Young, 2015). In addition, Carraway and Young (2015)

suggest leaders of this caliber sometimes limit the amount of time they set aside to work on instruction due to limited content knowledge of a specific subject area, instead focusing their energy on other responsibilities. Similarly, a study of mathematics instruction suggested limited experience of teaching the content and a lapse of time since coming out of the classroom hindered the effectiveness of the instructional leader (Carver et al., 2010).

Lack of Preparation as a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

Limited evidence exists about what level of content knowledge is necessary for an instructional leader to be effective (Steele et al., 2015). Many leaders have minimal preparation aligned to instructional responsibilities and research suggests less attention is paid to the skills necessary to promote instructional change of high-quality teaching and learning (Boston et al., 2017; Carver et al., 2010). If school districts wish to hire leaders who are instructionally sound in a specific content area, then hiring a leader who meets specified qualifications is crucial (Hassenpflug, 2013). Although many administrators hired at the high school level lack the content knowledge necessary to effectively lead instruction, school district support to promote content-focused instructional leaders is essential (Stein & Nelson, 2003). District-level support is required for leaders to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively lead instruction and influence teacher and student growth (Boston et al., 2017).

Additionally, administrative preparation programs seldom focus on content knowledge and undergraduate teacher certification programs center efforts around instruction (Steele et al., 2015). Most graduate-level administrator preparation programs focus on the managerial aspects of leadership; an instructional focus on curriculum is seldom addressed (Hassenpflug, 2013). Neumerski et al. (2018) suggests policymakers reexamine the principal preparation process to allow better alignment to the expected role of instructional leadership. Leadership focused on

teaching and learning within administrative preparation programs is necessary to enhance the capacity of support provided to teachers (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). Improvements of leadership preparation programs to include content-focused instruction could support the existing need to prepare effective leaders who can supervise specific content areas, especially in high schools (Lochmiller et al., 2012). Lochmiller et al. (2012) suggested leadership preparation programs integrate various disciplines to provide prospective students the content knowledge necessary to become effective instructional leaders.

Teachers also indicate the necessity of leaders understanding content so they receive meaningful feedback (Lochmiller, 2016). For this to happen, training and support around teaching and learning is critical (Neumerski et al., 2018). Because administrators typically work across various disciplines in the span of their position, they must become acclimated and flexible as instructional leaders among various content areas (Lochmiller, 2016). Leadership content knowledge provides an opportunity to support teachers through observation, with leaders providing meaningful feedback and suggesting targeted professional development related to the content for teachers' continued professional growth (Steele et al., 2015).

When the administrator has limited content knowledge of the subject they supervise, the teacher's ability to receive meaningful feedback is affected (Lochmiller, 2016). Timperley (2005) suggests professional development aligned to enhance the content knowledge and skills necessary for the instructional leader. If teacher practice is to be influenced by the instructional leader, then efforts to increase content knowledge of the leader are crucial (Lochmiller, 2016). Because high schools are typically departmentalized, effective instructional leaders work to expand their content knowledge to enhance working collaboratively with teachers for improved instruction (Lochmiller, 2016). "Unpacking some of the complexities, together with identifying

the assistance needed, may help both the research and practitioner communities better understand more precisely what is involved" (Timperley, 2005, p. 19).

The Role of Supports for Content-Focused Instructional Leaders

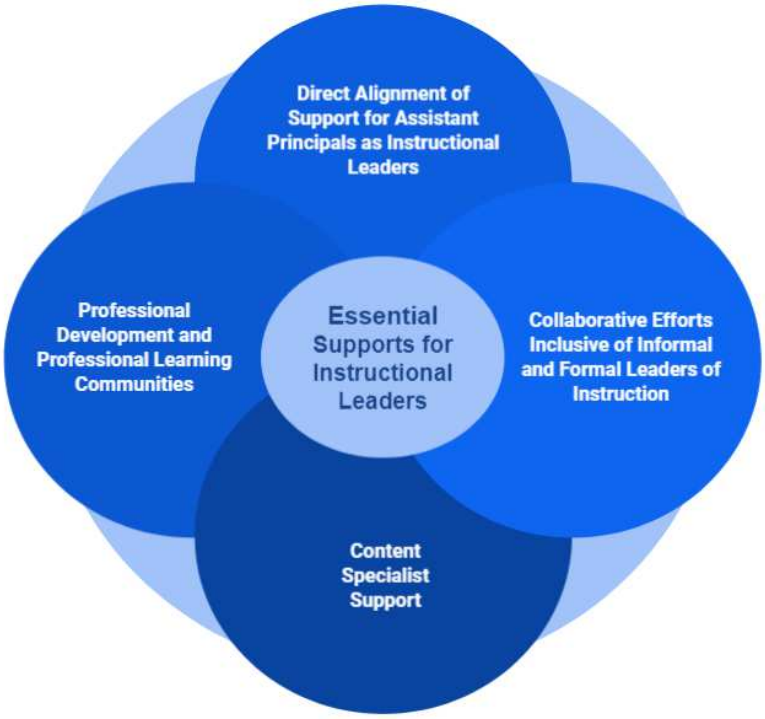
Content-focused instructional leaders engage with curriculum and work directly with teachers to implement supports for increased student achievement (Shaked, 2018). The role of the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader is now at the forefront of education, although the reality of the position varies (Rigby, 2014). Two key components include building positive relationships with teachers and creating an environment of organizational trust (Louis et al., 2010; Quong & Walker, 2010; Shaked et al., 2017). Effective content-focused instructional leaders hire and retain teachers knowledgeable of the content while providing ongoing support for professional growth (Mendels, 2012). Leadership opportunities through developed partnerships with multiple stakeholders also support instruction within the high school setting (Lochmiller et al., 2012).

Content-focused instructional leaders cannot go it alone. As pressure increases to raise student test scores, administrator actions of shared leadership responsibility play a role in improving instruction (Louis et al., 2010). Observing effective content-focused instructional leadership is incumbent upon sharing the role of leadership with competent knowledge holders (Carraway & Young, 2015). Collaboration among formal and informal leaders emphasizes the importance of shared work around instruction and administrators become just as engaged as teachers in the process (Louis et al., 2010). A shared focus around instruction within a content specific department also emphasizes the importance of community (Lochmiller et al., 2012). Ultimately, interweaving influence from multiple stakeholders could create opportunities for teachers' professional growth and increase academic achievement for students (Quong &

Walker, 2010). Figure 3 illustrates the various supports necessary for instructional leaders to be successful.

Figure 3

Essential Supports for Instructional Leaders



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Collaborative Efforts Inclusive of Informal and Formal Leaders of Instruction

Collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders support instructional improvement. Supervision of instruction encompasses observation of classroom practice, coaching cycles inclusive of discourse around content, and implementation of differentiated support for teachers (Lochmiller, 2016). Because assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders have multiple duties and responsibilities, time management is critical if they are to concentrate on supporting instruction (Shaked et al., 2017). The creation of a democratic organization can

empower multiple stakeholders to become involved in teaching and learning journey and aid leaders as they are challenged to find sufficient time for instructional improvement (Reitzug et al., 2008; Shaked et al., 2017). Distributed forms of leadership bring formal and informal leaders together in collaborative efforts toward achievement gains (Klar, 2012). Involving teachers in these processes increases potential for improvement based on their content expertise (Lochmiller, 2016). Teachers, as content experts, can advance student learning if provided the opportunity to work with other teachers to build capacity. Shared leadership is a commitment among various stakeholders to influence a common goal (Louis et al., 2010). Content-focused instructional leaders can observe, select, and delegate informal leaders who have the content knowledge and skills to improve teaching and learning within the school community (Mendels, 2012).

Distributive forms of leadership promote innovative schools and broaden the opportunity for multiple stakeholders to take part in overall academic student achievement (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Klar, 2012). In some cases, department chairs can serve as content-focused instructional leaders, given time and sufficient resources, encouraging capacity building for teachers in each department (Klar, 2012). Teachers who can both teach and lead can influence the practice of their colleagues (Louis et al., 2010; Neumerski, 2012; Smith et al., 2017). Support for teacher leaders is crucial. Klar (2012) suggested defining structured responsibilities for teacher leaders, allotting time to enhance their skillset to increase instructional effectiveness and empowering their voices in the decision-making process. Parallel partnerships between teacher leaders and content-focused instructional leaders have the potential to improve overall student achievement (Quong & Walker, 2010). Through motivation and shared commitment, increased instructional capacity creates a positive effect on teaching and learning whereby shared leadership remains a

central focus (Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Timperley, 2005). Ultimately, "leadership involves many people, rather than a single visionary" (Timperley, 2005, p. 4).

Because administrators as content-focused instructional leaders provide feedback for improvement of teaching and learning, designing a system to incorporate involving others is important (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Leaders with a mindset of shared responsibility can develop internal systems that improve overall student learning (Timperley, 2005). When there is a combined influence from all sources total leadership is evident (Leithwood et al., 2008). Full-time content specialists who enhance content knowledge are included in this framework of support—not only teachers, but also content-focused administrators. Combined efforts break down the complexity of instructional leadership where many stakeholders work together to improve instruction rather than a single individual trying to go it alone (Higgins & Bonne, 2011).

Content Specialist Support

Although research is limited about an assistant principal's ability to build the capacity of curriculum content alone, instructional coaches have the knowledge and skills necessary to fill these gaps (Leithwood et al., 2008; Mette & Riegel, 2018). One of the most important supports of the content specialist is leading meaningful professional development to enhance teacher and leader effectiveness. The ability to design, lead, and monitor implementation of high-quality professional development is one type of support content specialists provide (Jackson et al., 2015). Content specialists can support curriculum content knowledge and their schedules typically allow sufficient time devoted to a specific content area (Smith et al., 2017). Schools enhance their instructional capacity when seeking assistance from experts in departmental content areas (Klar, 2012).

The Influence of Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities

A restructured focus on instruction begins with the leader understanding the characteristics of effective professional development and the impact these experiences have on teaching and learning (Koonce et al., 2019). Providing meaningful professional development includes observing the implementation of learned strategies through ongoing monitoring and adjustment of teacher practice (Stein & Nelson, 2003). It is important for content-focused instructional leaders to consider teacher voice and individualized professional development needs as they work alongside teachers of a specific content area (Koonce et al., 2019). The positional power of the leader typically determines the professional development support teachers receive (Koonce et al., 2019; Lochmiller & Acker-Hocevar, 2016). Teachers' self-confidence increases when they recognize the importance of the engagement in their own learning through continued professional growth opportunities and ongoing support (Stein & Nelson, 2003).

The goal of learning for teachers involves specifically designed high quality professional development (Jackson et al., 2015). Content-focused instructional leaders often facilitate meaningful professional development by finding content experts to support the process (Timperley, 2005). Schools that take responsibility for improving instruction commit to supporting teachers' individual learning needs and use distributive leadership techniques to seek out informal leaders for guidance (Timperley, 2005). When internal content experts—such as teacher leaders, department leads, or instructional coaches—practice leadership skills, they can enhance the structure of teaching and learning with their colleagues. As such, intentional active engagement of content-focused instructional leaders in supporting teachers has the potential to promote teacher growth and increase student achievement (Koonce et al., 2019).

Professional learning communities also provide opportunities for teachers to work collectively toward common goals. When leaders and teachers engross themselves in efforts toward improved teaching and learning, their network of collaboration increases (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Dumay et al. (2013) suggested leaders collaboratively engaged with teachers influence collegial relationships. Content-focused instructional leaders must also create conditions that enable partnerships with those teaching the same content to take place (Lochmiller & Acker-Hocevar, 2016). Protection of time committed to collaborative engagement of content teachers in professional learning communities is crucial for improved teaching and learning. The master schedule must allow for collegial interactions among leaders, teachers, and content specialists to promote teacher practice and enhance student learning opportunities (Louis et al., 2010).

Direct Alignment of Support for Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders

Engagement and, when needed, content knowledge support of the instructional leader is imperative to improve teaching and learning. Typically, all administrators share, in some way, the responsibility of oversight of instruction; however, sometimes the instructional leader lacks specific content knowledge (Searby et al., 2017). Collaborative efforts of multiple formal and informal leaders within a building can support assistant principals (Celiken, 2001). Typical high schools are departmentalized, and the complex setting requires supplemental support to effectively lead instruction (Louis et al., 2010). Professional development for instructional leaders to increase content knowledge of a particular subject is pivotal for their success (Searby et al., 2017).

Intentional professional development aligned to the curriculum aids the leader in content knowledge development and can also provide the resources necessary to guide instructional

improvement of teachers. Just as teachers require differentiated professional development to enhance their skillset, the same is true for content-focused instructional leaders. Support including training on how to effectively coach teachers, including ways to provide meaningful feedback, can enhance the professional growth of leaders who supervise content areas differing from their own background (Lochmiller, 2016). Aas and Paulsen (2019) found involvement in specific content-focused learning groups improved not only content knowledge but also increased self-confidence of instructional leaders. Promotion of content knowledge involves identifying and implementing support for growth as a leader (Searby et al., 2017). Ultimately, supporting content-focused instructional leadership practices is important to improving instruction (Aas & Paulsen, 2019).

Leaders can overcome obstacles as they become resilient to change efforts for improving instruction by way of shared leadership and assistance from those with content expertise (Quong & Walker, 2010). Lochmiller et al. (2012) suggested leaders promote student achievement efforts through a variety of avenues. Effective leaders need continuous support through diverse opportunities to become competent with instruction (Searby et al., 2017). Both teachers and administrators need protected time devoted to instruction (Leithwood et al., 2010). Leithwood et al. (2010) found leaders influenced instruction by establishing conditions aligned with collaborative efforts to support teaching and learning. Building a school community network around instruction involves an array of both informal and formal leaders working together toward a common goal (Mendels, 2012).

Studies Addressing Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Several published studies provide an overview of information gathered about administrators who serve as content-focused instructional leaders. Although instructional

leadership has changed over the years, the need to have leaders focused on instruction remains the same (Edmonds, 1979). Several studies reveal the importance of leadership engagement throughout the process. When leaders are closely involved with the instructional program of their school, they find purpose in aligning a vision of high-quality instruction and set a direction to improve teaching and learning (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Dumay et al., 2013; Higgins & Bonne, 2011; Katterfield, 2013 Klar, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Shaked et al., 2017). Support for high school leaders is critical (Louis et al., 2010). Leader engagement enhancing teacher practice comes with an understanding of support necessary for the administrator. These supports include district-level support influencing the ability for instructional leaders to act as coaches, a focus on content knowledge to enhance their leadership practice, and regular professional development to assist in what it means to become an effective content-focused instructional leader (Boston et al., 2017; Carraway & Young, 2015; Koonce et al., 2019; Searby et al., 2017).

Development of leadership content knowledge of a particular subject, specifically in the high school setting, allows the instructional leader to support teacher growth and development (Louis et al., 2010). Leaders who take time to make sense of content knowledge can increase their self-efficacy in the position (Carraway & Young, 2015; Lochmiller & Acker-Hocevar, 2016). Some researchers have suggested post-holing, where an instructional leader unfamiliar with a particular subject explores the content quickly, but with enough depth to gain sufficient knowledge about how it is learned and taught (Stein & Nelson, 2003). It is understood that leaders have duties and responsibilities beyond instruction. Several researchers have noted that high school instructional leaders have a wide range of additional tasks associated with their position; distributed leadership and support are necessary for their success as they supervise

instruction (Higgins & Bonne, 2011; Leif & Odhiambo, 2017; Lochmiller, 2016). Distributed leadership allows multiple stakeholders to share leadership responsibilities and improve instruction (Klar, 2012; Leif & Odhiambo, 2017; Louis et al., 2010; Stein & Nelson, 2003).

Distributed leadership allows for teacher collaboration and improves collective efficacy as relationships are built through trust and a commitment to improved student learning (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Dumay et al., 2013; Louis et al., 2010). When leaders seek content expertise of informal and formal leaders, including department chairs, teacher leaders, teachers, and content specialists, this benefits student and teacher growth (Klar, 2012). Klar (2012) found that continuously monitoring the needs of various leaders, both formal and informal, and provide support and resources was necessary for their continued commitment and growth. When power is distributed among various leaders, relationships are established, teacher leaders can lead and facilitate professional development, and hierarchical and heterarchical configurations of authority blend together as a hybrid model to support instructional improvement (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Higgins & Bonne, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2013; Searby et al., 2017).

On the other hand, several researchers have contradicted the idea of the administrator as an active agent to support instruction. Some have characterized school leadership in the elementary setting as easier than secondary settings (Searby et al., 2017). When grade levels increase, leadership content knowledge becomes less fine-tuned, therefore mastery of one subject area can be challenging; some researchers have suggested teachers remain the content specialists rather than the instructional leader (Katterfield, 2013 Louis et al., 2010; Searby et al., 2017; Stein & Nelson, 2003). Incompetence, or absence of content knowledge due to lacking a highly qualified status in a specific content area, limits the support a leader can provide and causes the leader to direct attention toward others to assist with instructional improvement efforts

(Carraway & Young, 2015; Koonce et al., 2019; Lochmiller, 2016; Lochmiller et al., 2016; Searby et al., 2017; Shaked et al., 2017).

Instructional leaders who lack confidence and are insecure about implementing subject-specific professional development seek external support, hire and recruit those who have experience and expertise with the content, limit their engagement, view content-focused leadership as an added stress, and use their experience to evaluate teachers based on general teaching practices rather than content knowledge; this can lead to inadequate feedback related to the subject matter (Carraway & Young, 2015; Koonce et al., 2019; Lochmiller, 2016; Lochmiller et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017; Shaked et al., 2017). "It is therefore incumbent on administrators to learn how to work across these [subject] subcultures to support school wide instructional improvements" (Lochmiller, 2016, p. 76). Self-efficacy is one aspect of how assistant principals position themselves as content-focused instructional leaders based on their level of self-confidence. Different researchers have described leaders at both ends of the spectrum, (i.e., from those fully engaged to those seeking assistance due to insecurities). Effective content-focused instructional leadership is based on improving instruction and is determined by each leader's perception of the position.

Self-Efficacy: Conceptual Framework

The complexity of the position of an administrator has contributed to their influence on student learning (Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). Academic achievement is at the forefront of educational reform; therefore, an administrator's "sense of efficacy plays a critical role in meeting the expectations and demands of the position" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 582). Timperley (2005) suggested action for change be dependent on internal beliefs and assumptions, whereas motivation to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to become an

effective leader depends on each leader's personal value of worth. The ability to enhance leadership self-efficacy is critical (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Unfortunately, there is a limited knowledge base related to self-confidence of successful content-focused instructional leaders (McCormick, 2001). Administrators have the task of encouraging faculty and staff to believe in themselves (Fancera & Bliss, 2011). Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) suggested research on leader efficacy is in the early stages of development and recommended further research on leader efficacy to determine leadership practices necessary for success. Unfortunately, the importance of analyzing self-efficacy of administrator motivation and behavior is underexplored and under-researched, necessitating further research in this area (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Versland & Erickson, 2017).

Definition of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the relationship between (a) the capacity to perform a task based on the belief someone has about their own ability, and (b) the actions used to accomplish the task (Bandura, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Self-efficacy is also referred to as the belief of someone creating an attainable goal and a commitment toward accomplishing the goal (Schunk, 2016). "Self-efficacy is concerned with judgements about how well one can organize and execute courses of action" (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p. 587). Gannouni and Ramboarison-Lalao (2018) defined self-efficacy as an individual's self-perception of whether they had confidence in themselves to achieve certain results. Self-confidence and self-efficacy are similar because both relate to execution of a course of action involving a person's perceived judgment of themselves (McCormick, 2001; Versland & Erickson, 2017). Other scholars suggest similar interpretations including personal competency of what a person can achieve, motivational influence directed to lead others, and emotional reactions based on situational circumstances (Leithwood & Jantzi,

2008; Lewis & Jones, 2019; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). McCormick (2001) found self-efficacy related to motivation and self-worth, based on effort and persistence because of individual values and beliefs related to what a person set out to accomplish.

Self-efficacy beliefs contribute motivation and performance (Bandura, 1993; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Benight & Bandura, 2004). Self-efficacy is the "core belief that one has the power to produce desired effects by one's actions, otherwise one has little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties" (Benight & Bandura, 2004, p. 1131). Bandura (2012) suggested that people cannot have high self-efficacy in all situations. Self-efficacy is determined by the amount of effort an individual puts forth and, in the midst of obstacles, how they generate sustainability (Bandura, 1977). A person's beliefs about their capabilities vary depending upon their ability to self-appraise (Bandura, 1993, 2012).

Self-efficacy is developed in one of four ways: *mastery*, through experiences of resilience in situations where obstacles cause interference; *social modeling*, where people observe the success of those similar to themselves, increasing their belief in their own ability to accomplish a task; *social persuasion*, where a person's belief in themselves and their accomplishments are not measured against others; and *choice processes*, where decisions are made based on what a person sets out to accomplish (Bandura, 2012). When a person sets self-efficacy expectations, they either directly align their choices to reflect a desired outcome or avoid doing so due to aspects they perceive exceed their personal ability (Bandura, 1977). Ultimately, self-efficacy beliefs affect motivation and behavior (Bandura, 1993). Perceived self-efficacy relates to a person's willingness to display motivation, persistent behavior, and an overall belief about what they can accomplish (Bandura, 1977, 1989, 1993). Self-motivation is prescribed through personal goal

setting and the belief a person has in their own ability (Bandura, 1989; Bandura & Schunk, 1989).

A prerequisite for self-efficacy is self-reflection to determine if a person believes they can reach a desired outcome (Koonce et al., 2019). Successful leaders have a healthy sense of their own ability to be effective in their role (McCormick, 2001). Administrators with high self-confidence also tend to become emotionally connected to those they lead (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Self-confidence promotes an ability to lead a group successfully toward an end goal (McCormick, 2001). Furthermore, self-efficacy relates to education when a "perceived judgment of one's ability to affect change…[is] a foundational characteristic of an effective school leader" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 573).

How well a person copes with difficult situations depends on their level of self-efficacy (Benight & Bandura, 2004), which either enhances or impairs their ability to reach a desired outcome (Bandura, 1989). Ultimately, self-efficacy is related to a person's belief and motivation to accomplish a goal. Bandura (1993) suggested several ways personal beliefs influence overall motivation:

> Self-efficacy beliefs…determine the goals people set for themselves, how much effort they expend, how long they persevere in the face of difficulties, and their resilience to failures. When faced with obstacles and failures, people who harbor self-doubts about their capabilities slacken their efforts or give up quickly. Those who have a strong belief of their capabilities exert greater effort when they fail to master a challenge. (p. 131)

High and Low Self-Efficacy

A person's self-efficacy varies dependent on their skill level with a given task (Gannouni & Ramboarison-Lalao, 2018). Bandura (1989) found those with high self-efficacy find solutions

to overcome potential barriers, whereas those with low self-efficacy sense failure without attempting to conquer obstacles. Self-efficacy might swing like a pendulum depending on the situations; beliefs relating to the ability to accomplish a goal do not transfer the same way in all contexts (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Low self-efficacy could involve a leader avoiding a task if their competency and confidence levels are low due to lack of experience (Koonce et al., 2019; Lewis & Jones, 2019; Schunk, 2016). Characteristics associated with low self-efficacy include burnout, the inability to adjust, avoidance, exhaustion, anxiety, stress, lacking a sense of accomplishment, and a tendency to blame others or identify as a failure if the goal is not achieved (Schunk, 2016; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

Bandura (1993) described a low sense of self-efficacy as minimal commitment to goals, a struggle to overcome obstacles, lack of effort, avoidance, and minimal ability to recover a sense of increased self-efficacy when setbacks occur. A low sense of self-efficacy can bring about discouragement in times of failure, lower standards, and minimal self-worth when a person sees themselves as incapable of accomplishing a set out task (Bandura & Cervone, 1983). Bandura (1989) found inefficacious thinking to weaken motivation and inhibit performance. Those who have a low sense of self-efficacy tend to shy away from burdensome tasks and frequently display frustration (Bandura, 1993; Benight & Bandura, 2004).

While people commit to reaching a goal and self-reflect during the process, even when encountering difficulties, this indicates higher self-efficacy levels (Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Schunk, 2016). Bandura (1993) suggested those with high self-efficacy display characteristics such as approaching difficult tasks as opportunities, maintaining commitment toward reaching set goals, increasing efforts of sustainability, seeing failure as a chance to learn acquired skills necessary for success, rebounding quickly from interference, and continuously looking for ways

to grow. Those with high self-efficacy tend to be resilient, take risks knowing setbacks might occur, and display increased persistence (Bandura, 1989; Bandura & Locke, 2003). Leaders with high self-efficacy engage without reservation and persist longer to reach a desired goal (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Schunk, 2016). Those with high self-efficacy are observed as eager participants who face and conquer obstacles, expend substantial effort, and search for strategies and resources to support goal attainment (McCormick, 2001; Schunk, 2016).

For a leader to reach a high level of self-efficacy, they must believe in reaching a set goal based on self-worth while also motivating others (Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). Administrators with high self-efficacy are regarded as patient in pursuing goals and use difficult problems as avenues of opportunity (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Similarly, a focus on increased beliefs of collective instructional efficacy among content teams has the potential to contribute significantly to a school's overall academic achievement (Bandura, 1993). When leaders build efficacy and motivation among the teachers they supervise, professional growth follows (Bandura, 1993). Bandura (1993) suggested leadership is a key factor of academic achievement:

> The quality of leadership is also an important contributor to the development and maintenance effective schools. Strong principals excel in their ability to get their staff to work together with a strong sense of purpose and to believe in their capabilities to surmount obstacles to educational attainments…School staff members who collectively judge themselves as capable of promoting academic success imbue their schools with a positive atmosphere for development. (p. 141)

The Role of Self-Efficacy in Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Self-efficacy related to oversight of instruction involves being able to support student and teacher learning with confidence (McCormick, 2001; Schunk, 2016). Content-focused

instructional leadership behaviors are directly related to a leader's self-efficacy beliefs (X. Zheng et al., 2019). Individual leaders' "self-efficacy beliefs are...important because they guide the leader's actions and behaviors that affect expectations for students as well as teachers' motivation and school improvement processes" (Versland & Erickson, 2017, p. 1). When content-focused instructional leaders define a set of beliefs about enactment of policies and procedures, they show a willingness to lead the school toward success (Versland & Erickson, 2017). The level of support, effort, and persistence toward the accomplishment of a set goal increases the chance of flexibility when setbacks occur (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). As leadership demands increase, the confidence, support, and guidance administrators provide will affect their ability to make a difference (McCormick, 2001).

Leadership self-efficacy is crucial because it influences goal setting and motivation to execute accomplishment of the goal (McCormick, 2001). Several researchers have suggested ideas for increased self-efficacy. These include differentiated support provided while working toward a set goal in addition to opportunities for leaders to self-reflect on their experiences (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Lewis & Jones, 2019). "Leadership self-efficacy...is defined as one's self-perceived capability to perform the cognitive and behavioral functions necessary to regulate group process in relation to goal achievement" (McCormick, 2001, p. 30). Not only is self-efficacy a critical aspect of a content-focused instructional leader, but consideration of working in a collective capacity with others toward goal attainment is also important. Versland and Erickson (2017) found a content-focused instructional leader's commitment to increased self-efficacy ensured alignment with academic goals and contributed to collective teacher efficacy through collaboration efforts.

Ultimately, the instructional leader has an expectation of leading a quality program focused on curriculum and content (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Higher self-efficacy related to a leader's potential for supporting instruction is beneficial (Koonce et al., 2019). McCormick (2001) suggested embracing opportunities to enhance leadership self-efficacy. When hiring and retaining administrators, consideration of internal confidence and the belief they can meet the challenges of the position is important (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). As accountability in education has increased, increasing leadership capacity and self-efficacy has become vital for success (Searby & Armstrong, 2016).

Summary

Assistant principals as effective content-focused instructional leaders require intentional preparation and continuous support and development. Efforts toward instructional improvement are captured when less time is spent on management and more time is devoted to teaching and learning (Shaked, 2018). Leadership actions for learning improvement are at the center of an effective leader's practice (Lochmiller et al., 2012). Increased focus on student learning and teacher support involves a collaborative effort among many stakeholders as they work together toward a common goal (Shaked, 2018). Neumerski (2012) suggested a progression to align goals with leadership constructs for success:

> If we begin with what it is we want students to learn, we can then determine what kinds of instruction will lead to that goal, what teachers need to learn to be able to implement that kind of instruction, and, finally, how leaders facilitate teacher learning around that targeted instruction. (p. 337)

A commitment toward a common vision is established when a leader is effective and has a goal of impacting teaching and learning (Mendels, 2012). The alignment of a set purpose

supports instructional leadership efforts (Reitzug et al., 2008). When an organization strategically positions content-focused instructional leaders, the potential for increased capacity for student learning can maximize goal attainment (Quong & Walker, 2010). Self-efficacy of content-focused instructional leaders ultimately determines whether goals will be successfully accomplished. Organizational constructs and supports in place for content-focused instructional leaders influence student achievement and teacher growth outcomes based on leadership confidence and competence. Content-focused instructional leaders have the potential to enhance opportunities for teachers and students; therefore, inspiring leader actions to enhance self-efficacy is influential (Schrik & Wasonga, 2019).

CHAPTER III

Methods

A grounded theory qualitative research method used for the study focused on in-depth interviews with assistant principals as instructional leaders in the high school setting. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined grounded theory development as the "discovery of theory from data…[that]…provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications" (p. 1). Categories and their properties are created through evidence provided by the examination of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Similarities and differences of evidence captured using a constant comparison method allows the researcher to "[generate] a theory that is integrated, consistent, plausible, [and] close to the data" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 103). Essentially, grounded theory involves careful selection of participants for the study where collection of interview data is coded by generating categories and properties related to specific situations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory involves identifying an area of interest, pinpointing structural processes related to what is being studied, incorporating purposive and snowball sampling techniques, collecting data, and using data analysis to make an informed decision about the emergence of a theory.

In this study, a grounded theory approach rendered an awareness of participants in the role of assistant principal. Data were collected through interview questions to generate theory based on commonalities or differences among findings (e.g., Ivey, 2017; Noble & Mitchell, 2016). I analyzed perceptions of selected assistant principals who supervise high school content area(s), noting whether they were highly qualified in the specific content area they supervised. The grounded theory research approach supported the investigation, bringing to light the emergence of theory grounded by the analysis of data collected from participants (Noble &

Mitchell, 2016; Walsh et al., 2015). Grounded theory methodology includes "engaging a phenomenon from the perspective of those living in it, which means it is most suited toward inductive examinations seeking deep insight into a phenomenon and its connections with the context" (Corley, 2015, p. 600).

Inductively generating findings with a grounded theory qualitative constant comparison method approach incorporates the discovery of perceptions and experiences of participants toward understanding a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mahdiuon et al., 2017). Ultimately, those participating in the study provided insight about their perceptions as instructional leaders who supervise content at the high school level. The grounded theory qualitative method approach allowed me to generate similarities and differences of participant perspectives (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Mahdiuon et al. (2017) suggested grounded theory consists of the researcher thoroughly examining transcribed interviews to make connections collected during the data collection phase, eventually leading toward the emergence of a theory to describe the reality of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. Strauss and Corbin (1990) proposed the development of grounded theory by using the constant comparison method to uncover participants' perceptions and aid the understanding of a given phenomenon—in this case, assistant principals as instructional leaders. The findings describe assistant principals as instructional leaders and how they are effective, or not, based on their self-efficacy and the content knowledge they have related to the subjects they supervise.

This chapter is organized into seven sections. First, the purpose and research questions are presented. Second, the research design, specific methods, sampling strategies used, and rationale for the design selection are addressed. Third, I present the target population for this study, including a description of the sample selected, inclusion criteria, and the procedures used

to identify and recruit participants. Next, I share information regarding the data collection and analysis phase. Then, I describe ethics and human subject protections I used, as well as current research training and certification I completed, the processes I used to protect human subjects, the IRB approval process, consent process, and mitigation strategies to support research bias. The next section describes the interview questions, their alignment with the study, strategies for credibility and dependability, use of a pilot test, and support of an expert panel to suggest revisions. Finally, the chapter concludes with limitations of the study and the potential impact those limitations might have had on the overall findings.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the implications of assistant principals as they supervise instruction at the high school level based on whether they are highly qualified in a specific content area. Two main research questions were addressed: How and in what ways do assistant principals who supervise instruction at the high school level make sense of their position, depending upon whether they are highly qualified in their content area? And, What is the relationship between an assistant principal's content area base of expertise and their self-efficacy around supervising a specific content area? These questions provided guided this investigation of assistant principals as instructional leaders at the high school level.

Methodology and Research Design

The entire grounded theory process of using a constant comparative method incorporates various stages of coding—including open, axial, and selective coding—to generate theory grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding involved taking data collected and developing categories by way of a thorough analysis of findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, I used axial coding, bringing categories together in new ways based on common connections

found among the categories (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, I used selective coding to finalize three main categories as they related to similar categories based on relationships found from the initial categories developed (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While the data collection phase continued, I analyzed each new interview using the coding methods described to provide additional insight to what had already been collected. The cycle continued until data saturation occurred when similar data instances were found over and over again and the development of a category was evident (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). Essentially, emergent findings provided categories and generated explanations of theory for understanding the practical applications and ways to enhance such situations for the future (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

After open, axial, and selective coding were completed, the stages of development in deriving theory came from a continuous process. Glaser and Strauss (1967) described the constant comparative method as consisting of four stages: "(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties [to form memos], (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the story" (p. 105). Each stage transforms into the next until the researcher is convinced of the development of a substantive theory and the writing of the story begins (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method allows researchers to gain knowledge of participants and explain certain situations as well as the ability to support a potential area in need of further investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Ultimately, Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained the importance of using the constant comparative method of grounded theory because it provides "a firsthand immersion into a sphere of life and action…[and] yields important dividends" (p. 226). Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained theory development as four interrelated components, including a connection to the area studied, translating findings so they are understandable to the reader, generalizing

applications generated by findings, and the ability for the user to seek firsthand knowledge of what needs to occur to achieve success.

Naderifar et al. (2017) suggested grounded theory research is used to gain a deeper understanding of a situational experience. My study incorporated two specific sampling techniques: purposive and snowball. *Purposive sampling* happens when participants are not randomly selected, but rather they fit specified criteria to be included as part of the study sample (Campbell et al., 2020). "The purposive sampling technique is a type of non-probability sampling that is most effective when one needs to study a certain…domain with knowledgeable experts within" (Tongco, 2006, p. 147). Studies that use purposive sampling require the researcher to develop a research problem, identify the type of information necessary to address the problem, define the qualities of the participants, find informants who meet the requirements based on these defined qualities, use appropriate data collection techniques, and analyze the findings (Tongco, 2006). Ultimately, purposive sampling is a nonrandom and non-probabilistic sampling approach (Guest et al., 2006; Olsen et al., 2013). The goal is to discover the perspectives of selected participants in direct alignment with the study (Campbell et al., 2020). There is no set number of participants necessary for a study that uses purposive sampling (Tongco, 2006). Instead, finding informants with set traits through careful selection allows a researcher to conduct a more detailed study (Naderifar et al., 2017; Tongco, 2006). Participant selection is focused on the study's research questions (Tongco, 2006). Careful selection also allows each participant to provide unique and valuable information to the study (Guest et al., 2006; Suen et al., 2014). Typically, the sample size reflects the level of data saturation where themes presented in the data become redundant (Guest et al., 2006; Suen et al., 2014). Campbell et al. (2020) found selecting participants who match the focus of the research study improves

findings. Although results are limited to those within the study, the purposive sampling technique provides reliable data (Tongco, 2006). Purposive sampling through direct selection of participants leads into the next sampling technique known as snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling is another non-probability method used as a continuation of purposive sampling to recruit more participants (Glen, 2014; Naderifar et al., 2014). Snowball sampling consists of asking those already interviewed to enlist others to take part in the research if they are likely to know others who meet the sample criteria (Glen, 2014). Snowball sampling is so named because once the ball is rolling with a few participants, they, in turn, can suggest others—picking up additional participants along the way (Glen, 2014; Naderifar et al., 2017). The research itself is a gradual process where data saturation drives completion of participant recruitment (Kalam et al., 2015; Naderifar et al., 2017). For this study, research design methods required selective identification of assistant principals who supervised instruction at the high school level.

Overview of Sample Population

The sixteen participants included in the study were from three regions of Virginia (Tidewater, Northern Virginia, and the Valley). Majority of the participants were from the western part of Virginia based on reaching out to personal professional contacts who suggested assistant principals from the Shenandoah Valley where I was born and raised. Additional participants were from areas based on doctoral cohort members suggesting assistant principals from their districts to be included in the study. The Tidewater region included five participants from three school districts. The Northern Virginia region included two participants from two school districts. The Valley region included nine participants from two school districts.

Participants received degrees for their administrative preparation programs from seven public and private universities in the state of Virginia. The range of previous teaching or other

educational experience for all selected participants was 6–22 years before becoming a high school assistant principal. The total number of years as a high school assistant principal position ranged from 1–24 years. Participants indicated a total of 51 content areas supervised at the high school level in their current position. Only 13 out of 51 (25%) of those areas were supervised by an assistant principal with highly qualified status in the content area as indicated by their VDOE credentials. Tongco (2006) found an important aspect of research is to be certain of the position of potential candidates when selecting them to participate in a study. Inclusion criteria of being a high school assistant principal supervising content areas ultimately determined what made a meaningful research participant who could provide insight as evidence was collected throughout the study (Tongco, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis Phase

The data collection and analysis phase began with the creation of interview questions to reflect alignment with the research questions and literature review. I conducted a pilot study with three researchers as participants and made changes to the interview questions to refine focus and alignment with the study. The data collection phase included one interview with each participant. Each interview was recorded and transcribed and all components of the interview process were kept confidential. All generated transcripts were housed on an online password protected My Cloud Home storage device. I sent the transcripts to individual participants for feedback on any changes they felt necessary before the data were included in the study. Next, during the hand coding phase, I reviewed each transcript upon completion throughout the process. The entire process included capturing notes from each transcript on a Google Sheet matrix to align the interview question (by column) and participant (by row) with each response provided. Throughout this process, I read through each transcript multiple times to make sure ideas from

each participant were identified.

After all interviews were complete and all data were displayed in the matrix as an individual memo for each participant, I highlighted each column one question at a time and carefully analyzed the data. I created further memos incorporating ideas from all participants collectively related to each question. The process generated a plethora of categories that required further hand coding. I used excerpts from participants' interviews to support evidence of each category developed. After creating the initial set of many categories, I printed all of the categories, cut them out, and pinned them to two trifold backboards. I then took all of the generated ideas created and funneled them down into three main categories.

Themes and a few subthemes emerged for each of the three main categories. Additionally, peer researchers were identified to review my preliminary findings during the final category development phase to provide feedback and validation. The entire process supported alignment of similarities revealed from the interview responses collectively as well as uncover differences in participants' shared perceptions by using open, axial, and selective coding. The structure supported synthesizing ideas to uncover and reveal three overall categories with themes in addition to several subthemes. The overall synopsis of findings of the study are reported in Chapter 4.

Research Ethics and Human Subjects Protection

I protected the anonymity of participants selected for inclusion in this study and all information provided remained confidential. Throughout the study selected participants remained informed by way of a request letter (Appendix A) for consideration. Candidates agreeing to participate also received an informed consent letter (Appendix B), indicating their choice to volunteer in the research study. After the consent form was signed, interviewees had the right to

review their transcript I captured. I conducted interviews of selected participants outside of their contractual hours. Before conducting interviews, I completed the CITI Program Training through Old Dominion University in Social-Behavioral-Responsible Conduct of Research. An IRB request was submitted through Old Dominion University and approved.

A potential source of research bias was my role as a current assistant principal and instructional leader in a high school within the state of Virginia. To mitigate this bias, all interview transcripts completed were provided to the individual participant for review as well as peer researchers utilized to support the generalization of category and theme development captured from the findings. I also selected participants from across the state, not just the local area where I work. Direct analysis of transcripts by hand coding supported the development of identifying connections and transcript data were used as evidence to support these findings. Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggested maintaining confidentiality throughout the study while removing research bias structures provides an opportunity for productive results.

Instrumentation

The data collection for this study consisted of an interview session with each participant. A set of open-ended interview questions (Appendix C) reviewed by an expert panel consisting of three Ph.D. students who took part in an initial pilot study assisted to ensure credibility and dependability of the interview questions used with participants by providing feedback. Interview questions were aligned with the main research questions and informed by the literature review to capture the perspectives of assistant principals as instructional leaders. Each participant spent approximately 30 – 45 minutes in a Zoom setting providing responses to the interview questions. Participants provided information about ways they view effective content-focused instructional leadership depending upon their level of content knowledge within a particular subject area.

Limitations

Several limitations exist related to using non-probability methods of sampling. Generalizing the entire population is not possible using such methods (Naderifar et al., 2017). Purposive and snowball sampling provide access to participants directly in line with the work. Another limitation was accessibility of assistant principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations existed with being able to meet face-to-face with participants, therefore all interviews were completed online using Zoom. "With…interviewing…the researcher sometimes faces the additional problem of fitting his activity into the daily routines of his subjects" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 178). A small sample size can also limit findings.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of assistant principals who supervise instruction at the high school level based on whether they were highly qualified in a specific content area. Current assistant principals were interviewed, and they described their personal encounters related to the successes and challenges they experience in their position. The chapter begins with a brief synopsis of the locations of the 16 participants included in the study, including an overview of their previous educational experience and the number of years they had been a high school assistant principal at the time of the study. Next, information is shared about the total number of areas each participant supervised and whether they held a highly qualified status in those areas according to the VDOE. Finally, the chapter concludes with findings related to three main categories established through an in-depth analysis of the data; interwoven themes and connections are described. The three main categories are finding balance associated with the assistant principal position, the influence of highly qualified status as a content-focused instructional leader, and self-efficacy related to self-confidence of the position.

Participant Overview

Participants from three of Virginia's regions (Tidewater, Northern Virginia, and the Valley) were recruited to participate in this study. Region 2, Tidewater, included five participants from a total of three school districts. Region 4, Northern Virginia, included two participants from two different school districts. Region 5, the Valley, included nine participants from a total of two school districts. Participants received administrative degrees from seven different universities within the state of Virginia. Before becoming high school assistant principals, participants reported a range of 6–22 years of previous teaching or other educational experience. The total

number of years as a high school assistant principal for participants ranged from 1–24 years. Table 1 provides an overview of the study's participants.

Table 1

Participant Overview

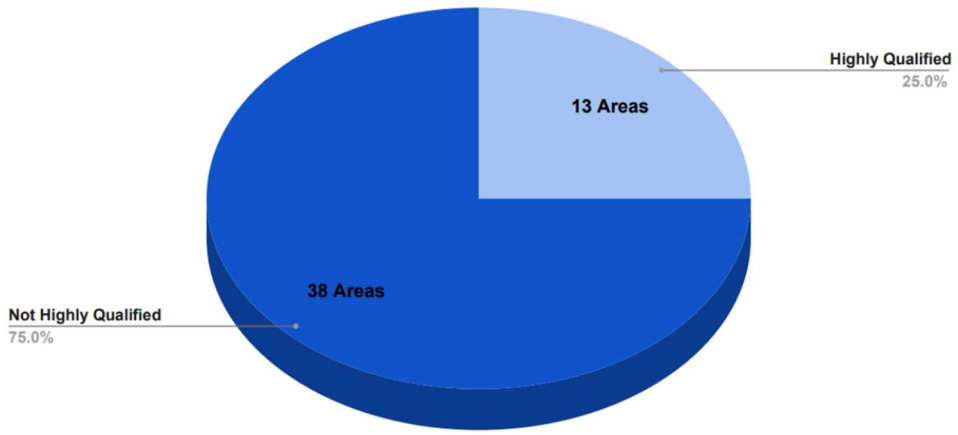
Participant	Region	Years in Education Before Becoming AP	Years as High School AP	Areas Supervised	Highly Qualified Content Areas*
David	NOVA	11	4	CTE, Math, Science, English, History	CTE
Dawn	Valley	14	3	English, Fine Arts	English
Jack	Valley	12	5	Health & PE, Alternative Education, Math	Health & PE
Grace	Valley	13	4	Science, World Language, Special Education	Science
April	Tidewater	21	3	Math, Special Education	-
Nancy	Tidewater	13	1	Health & PE, Drivers Education, Fine Arts, CTE, World Language	Health & PE, Drivers Education
Emily	Valley	21	4	World Language, Health & PE, Social Studies, Math	Spanish
Eric	Valley	14	8	World Language, Math	-
Joe	Valley	8	24	English, Social Studies	English
Susan	Tidewater	22	4	CTE, World Language, Math, Health & PE, Science	-
Jacob	Valley	21	8	Special Education, Health & PE, Social Studies	Health & PE
Sara	Tidewater	6	3	English, Special Education, Fine Arts	English
Keith	Tidewater	17	2	English, Science, CTE, Math	Math
Amy	Valley	15	14	Special Education, ESL	Special Education
Cindy	Valley	12	1	CTE, Science, Health & PE	Health & PE
Charles	NOVA	16	3	Science, Business, FACS	-

Note. NOVA = Northern Virginia; AP = Assistant Principal; CTE = Career and Technical Education; PE = Physical Education; ESL = English as a Second Language; FACS = Family & Consumer Sciences.
*According to Virginia Department of Education Teacher and Educator License Query (https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/tinfo/)

Participants indicated supervising anywhere from two to five areas in their current position as a high school assistant principal. Figure 4 displays the overall findings of whether assistant principals interviewed held highly qualified endorsements in areas beyond administration and supervision.

Figure 4

Percentage of Assistant Principals' Highly Qualified Status According to VDOE



Note. VDOE = Virginia Department of Education

Balance of Roles and Responsibilities Associated With the Assistant Principal Position

Participants shared that their ability to balance their role and focus on instructional leadership was both deliberate and difficult. Ideas of creating balance included the use of a calendar to block out time or creating a set schedule. Susan explained her strategy of scheduling time to get into classrooms: "What I know to do, I have a schedule, even though it doesn't always work out. But I schedule the times when I need to get out to the classrooms." Others discussed the need of prioritizing, intentionality, and setting parameters to designate uninterrupted time to work with teachers. Keith explained how he prioritized the instructional leadership aspect of his position.

> So to be honest, I think it's really about what you prioritize. So for example, I've had weeks where like I really want to get into classrooms where I don't have to be intentional as much, and I don't have a lot going on in the building. And so I've done six to eight observations in a week. But then there's times where I know that I haven't been intentional about it and other things catch up to me and I end up not doing any observations in a week. And so I, you know, I think it takes a lot of discipline.

Amy had a similar perspective, stating, "There's no set boundaries or guidelines. You have to set those parameters in place and you try to stick to it as best you can." Likewise, Nancy shared her outlook for balancing her role. "But I just try to, you know, balance it to where everybody's getting what they need and I'm not overcompensating in one area versus another."

Other participants had opposing views of being able to create a balance of non-instructional duties with those of instructional leadership. These participants discussed the how nonessential tasks led them to miss out on opportunities to work with teachers on instruction. Jack stated, "So I think balance is tough." Joe expressed a similar thought: "It's tough. I would say...there is no balance." Grace commented on the fact that nonessential tasks hindered her efforts to work with teachers, sharing, "I spend, if I'm totally honest, maybe 20% of my time with teachers on instruction, the rest of the time is not that." Sara had a related thought: "Balance is hard…a lot of times observations and evaluations and things that you really want to focus on—sometimes you're just, you're just not able to focus on them all, especially in the building if you're dealing with…the day-to-day." There are days when Cindy suggested the added roles and responsibilities of the job beyond instructional leadership made her feel overwhelmed.

> Sometimes you can see the look of, "Oh my gosh," going on my face when I move from this, to this, to this, to this, you know, run upstairs, have to do an IEP meeting, that kind

> of thing. So I'm not sure I have found that balance yet, but it's something that I know I have to work on.

Constant interruptions, such as being pulled away from instruction due to student behavior also interfered with time spent with teachers. Cindy shared, "I would say…less of my time is spent with instruction." Grace also mentioned the interruptions impeding her time with teachers as an instructional leader:

> There is no balance. If I'm being really honest with you, it is all trying to pull kids in, trying to make sure kids are attending, trying to make sure they are not failing, trying to offer support, talking with kids, supporting teachers, helping to, to glue those relationships back together and repair them. It is all…the unexpected that, that pops up. And the urgent crowds out the important, and I am not having deep conversations with teachers on a frequent basis about instruction more than a few times a year.

Discipline was also deemed as interference of being able to center attention around instruction. Eric said, "Discipline, that's a big time consumer." Likewise, April shared, "it can eat up your whole day." Jacob shared a specific example of discipline interrupting time he could have spent in classrooms.

> Case in point, we had a situation last week where a student brought an airsoft gun to school. And you know, we got that information about 8:30 in the morning and you know, it was probably 12:30–1:00 o'clock until we really got that wrapped up. And so, you know, basically my instructional day was shot. I mean, as far as trying to do anything instructionally for our teachers or our students. So I would say, you know, it's very difficult, you know, there's time…that really instruction goes by the wayside because I'm dealing with so many other things.

The assistant principals in this study shared that many hours in their day were geared toward discipline. Joe said discipline encompassed more than 50% of what he does on the job.

Additional Instructional Aspects of the Assistant Principal Position

Special education (which the participants referred to as "SPED") and serving on and facilitating various leadership committees were common areas of supervision for eight of the participants. April suggested her focus on special education pulled her away from working with teachers in classrooms due to the tremendous amount of time spent supervising this particular area.

> I mean SPED is a different world. If something in SPED comes up, I drop everything else because—as I got told when I took it over—you know, in life, we juggle all these balls. Some of them are rubber and bounce back. Some of them are glass. But in SPED everything's glass. You can't drop anything. You can't be late on a deadline. Like, so that eats up a lot of my time.

Although special education and facilitating leadership committees were common themes among participants, other non-instructional duties assigned to the assistant principal also interrupted their time to work with teachers.

Non-Instructional Duties Assigned to the Assistant Principal

Participants shared a plethora of additional roles and responsibilities beyond those of instructional leadership associated with their position. In addition to those already discussed, some of the most frequent non-instructional duties mentioned included oversight of operations, student attendance, and transportation. Referring to the many roles and responsibilities held by a high school assistant principal, April said, "You're kind of like a jack of all trades." Amy shared a similar thought: "So I'm not sure if there is a defined list. I think it's just all [cumbersome].

And again, and then whatever's asked of you or thrown at you from you, from your principal or anybody else that needs help."

Several participants talked about additional duties, including oversight of new teachers, school programs, school safety and improvement, development of the master schedule, supervision of students, after-school coverage, and student services. Emily said her work with Spanish-speaking families to provide support and build relationships with students and parents takes a great deal of her time.

> I'm kind of the connective tissue for a lot of students and families, and that is by default because I speak Spanish and we have a target Spanish speaking population. I'm the only person in the office right now that speaks Spanish.

All of the participants held a variety of specific roles and responsibilities designated within their position as well as being instructional leaders within their buildings. Participants shared various aspects of being able to balance the many expectations of their job, yet some described obstacles hindering their progress.

The Role of the Assistant Principal as an Instructional Leader

The role of assistant principal as an instructional leader was described in two forms in my analysis of interview data. The two subthemes of instructional leadership were described as content-focused instructional leadership and a focus on general teaching practices. The description was highly determined by participants' knowledge of the content over the areas they supervised within their school. If a participant was knowledgeable and confident in a specific content area, the data revealed a leadership style geared toward content. If the participant was unfamiliar with a particular subject area they supervised, findings indicated the instructional leader leaning toward general teaching practices when observing, supporting, and evaluating

teachers. The subthemes are supported by detailed evidence of each participant's approach to their selected style of instructional leadership.

Content-Focused Instructional Leadership. Familiarity and understanding the language in a particular content area due to previous educational experience was an important aspect of content-focused instructional leadership for participants in this study. Grace suggested that her understanding of the science curriculum made it straightforward to support the content area: "So science is easy. I mean, I, I taught science, so I, I speak that as a native, as a native speaker." Jacob shared a similar thought in reference to supervision over the physical education department: "I can tell you my conversations with my three PE people, when it comes to post observation or post evaluation, are more in-depth because I know that content." Sara had a similar belief, saying, "So of course English is…I don't want to say a given, but it's really easy for me in terms of English to really help professionally develop English teachers because I understand the concept." Some participants also suggested their passion for specific content areas, even if out of their realm of expertise, impacted their attention when it came to their focus of instructional leadership.

For others, trying to determine where to start in order to become an instructional leader focused on the content of areas took them beyond their comfort zone. Jack described his experience as putting himself into the curriculum and focusing on how best to support his teachers.

> What instructional materials do you suggest I read, what do you suggest I dive into so that I have a better understanding of what, when I got into a classroom, I'm looking for? We know what good learning looks like. We can tell when kids are engaged and on task versus just being compliant. But I really wanted to know how I could support the

> teachers…So you know, it's what I personally did for the math department was I immersed myself as much as I could in any type of…like math for dummies types of books, the math instruction type of material that I was able to get my hands on…while I wouldn't say I was highly qualified, I was aware of what I was looking for.

Nancy echoed the idea of taking a plunge into learning the content and focusing on how to best support the teachers was, sharing that she was, "just trying to become more knowledgeable by putting myself into the content a little more." Sara expressed how she took time to learn more about special education.

> So you know, the 5-inch special education binder? I took it home and I read it and you know, I've watched the videos and I've built my own capacity up in that area, so that I'm able, because I saw that as a gap myself when they came to me for assistance with specific issues with an IEP I didn't have the answer because I didn't know. So I had a gap in my knowledge, and so I had to work and find resources.

Several other participants sought a deeper understanding of the areas they supervised by exploring professional development opportunities, such as listening to podcasts, reading literature aligned with the curriculum, attending non-required meetings, and using VDOE resources to support content knowledge—all as an investment in curriculum advancement. Charles and Nancy both described how the VDOE helped support their leadership with a content focus. Charles stated "I can go to the VDOE website and check for the standards there. That's my primary resource." Nancy suggested a similar focus of "really looking at the VDOE objectives and SOLs so that I'm familiar with what I'm supposed to be seeing when I walk into a classroom."

The participants also immersed themselves into content by attending content-focused sessions with their teachers and independent courses about unfamiliar content. Jack described his experience as a way to enrich his own content knowledge to be able to provide support to his teachers:

> I've been to numerous math in-services…and being very honest with people, like, I'm here because this was not my content area. I want to be able to support the teachers the best I can…just trying to immerse myself into how I can fully support the math program. So, I would go and sit with our teachers and they probably didn't find it comfortable sitting with me…but…I have a good relationship with them. I think they see that I'm trying to be the best I can be with my limited content knowledge.

Susan shared a similar situation of how she takes time to absorb content knowledge in order to support her teachers; she even took a foreign language class all on her own:

> Well, actually, I spoke with our Spanish and French teacher and they referred me to some websites where you can get like the basic Spanish and the French, and I've actually just purchased a Spanish speaking course just to, you know, cause I thought it was kinda neat. You know, I'm in Spanish, I'm doing the Spanish, I'm doing the French, and I'm able to learn some of those things. So that's one thing I'm going to try to help my, help me to be better when I'm in a world language class and I don't know any world language.

Overall, participants agreed that understanding the curriculum of the areas they supervised was an important aspect of supporting teachers. Amy brought all of these ideas together with her thoughts, saying, "I think it's important to stay abreast of what the changes have been and new information so you can be that leader for your team."

Other ideas around content-focused instructional leadership also surfaced in conversations with participating assistant principals. Some ideas centered around working directly with content professional learning communities, lesson development and implementation related to the curriculum alignment with the VDOE, a focus on student-centered instruction, whether students leave class differently than when they arrived based on the intended learning objective for the day, supporting teachers to disaggregate data, and providing feedback to teachers. A priority for participants in this study was collaborative work within professional learning communities centered around content and intentionality of the leader being an active and present participant in those communities. Participants also shared about using strategies of a strong content knowledge holder and their ability to use ideas related to other content areas. Sara explained how she uses her knowledge of English to support other content areas:

> So for instance, in English as a content [area], individual conferencing is a huge part of English pedagogy, especially with writing. And sometimes you don't see that in the math and the science classes. So even if I'm taking that and using that in your class and what the individual conferencing, looking especially at a student's work, and it just allows you to really gain just, just more information, just some one-on-one time with that student, but it really, it can just build so many things, whether you're building your relationships or just that one-on-one connection.

Participants also identified lesson development and implementation related to alignment of the curriculum and lesson plan with the VDOE. Assistant principals interviewed focused on specific and clear learning objectives specified within the lesson including the evaluation component at the end of the lesson. Their main focus was determining whether students would leave the classroom differently than when they arrived, with the learning objective clearly

communicated to students throughout the course of the lesson. Susan described her observations of teachers as having an emphasis on lesson plan structure and execution: “When I’m in the classroom actually doing the observations, I’m looking at the lesson plans and making sure that what I’m hearing, what I’m seeing, is connected to the lesson plan.” Charles shared a similar thought, saying that “ensuring that there is an alignment between the state expectations and the objectives set forth by the state, the standards, the adoption by the school division, [and] in our own pacing scope and sequence guides that we use.”

In addition to those aspects of the lesson, participants also discussed ideas related to student-centered instruction, including differentiation based on the diversity of students in their schools. Sara shared her outlook of observing and supporting teachers as, “I immediately think about student-centered instruction. I think about recent research and the implementation of research strategies, instructional best practices in the classroom.” She also brought up the idea of student-centered collaboration:

> More challenging sometimes at the high school level, you know, project-based learning and assessments have really become huge or a big role for that. I think that was really eye-opening for my teachers who were reluctant to allow collaborative work within the classroom. They saw that not only was it so much more engaging, but they saw the problem-solving skills of kids just really take off because they were talking. I mean, peer teaching is such a powerful way for students to learn if they’re given the opportunity and we engage in that and leadership. I mean, that, that creates so many opportunities for, for our students…they need to see that by implementing and incorporating opportunities for students to engage with each other and interactive activities we’ll gain even more.

Cindy spoke about the gradual release of student-centered instruction: "I definitely believe that…in instruction…especially [for] students that we serve, the diversity that we serve, having that…approach, the 'I do, we do, you do' approach is so important." Similarly, Keith stated, "I want to see differentiation if you're, you know, teaching a strategy, you know, in math. I want to see that there's a couple other strategies presented because you need to make sure you're reaching all of our children."

Another aspect of content-focused instructional leadership that participants mentioned was the opportunity to gather data about student understanding. The types of formative feedback teachers use to determine which students have mastered the learning objective for the day and how feedback is provided to students was a similar theme. David spoke about the idea of questioning teachers to prompt their self-reflection: "What growth do I want to see from [students]?...How do you know your kids are getting it? This is your goal." Likewise, Charles shared, "So what is it that the students are doing…what opportunities were utilized to collect formative information or data or even informative information and how was that shared with the students?" Keith echoed these ideas, saying:

> So, when I think about content-specific supervision, I think about, I'm not going into the room to have conversations or notice things like your bulletin board is prepared. Oh, you're wearing your ID badge. You had your agenda on the board. I think that's the type of feedback that I got when I was a teacher, and no disrespect to those people. I think that was the expectation, but I think my job is to go look at, What's the learning target? Did students learn that learning target today? How do you know? What evidence do you have? Were they engaged? What strategies were you using? How does that connect to the blueprint and how aligned is your learning target and your formative assessment? So, I

> think that's what is important when we talk about content-specific instructional leadership.

A leader's ability to analyze and disaggregate data to focus on student learning and implementing differentiation was another common theme among participants. Components discussed were those of centralized areas needing improvement to enhance student learning and student achievement. Sara described the process of using data to support teachers:

> Data, and whether that's student data, just from assessments, but how do we use…data? And some people are afraid of the language, they're afraid of just to touch it, what it, what it looks like and how are we using that to really, really inform our planning and our delivery? And so I think one of the primary strengths of good instructional leaders is you have to know how to use it, what it looks like, how to apply it…and so I do have conversations with a lot of my teachers, teaching them ways to look at data in different ways to be able, really to improve student achievement and to improve student learning really as an instructional leader.

Data allowed leaders to work with teachers to determine whether students were understanding content, and to support teachers through the data analysis process. David gave the example of working with a new teacher who was frustrated due to students not performing on assessments as they should. David worked with the teacher to review the data and found students were doing well with building connections and making inferences but having difficulty answering lower level questions.

Data analysis, combined with specific feedback strategies shared with teachers, was described as the ability to support teachers as they move forward with instructional decisions. April provided an example related to data and feedback:

> I just worked with a teacher who was on a [performance improvement] plan, got them off the plan, and it just took listening and letting them try things and fail at it. It's okay if you're working with a teacher…and they try something and they fail at it, as long as you're there to support them. So, okay, "What'd you learn from it? What did you like about it?" And the teacher was telling me, "Oh, I like this, but it didn't do what I needed it to do." Alright, well, you want to change it up and letting them kind of, because every teacher has their own teaching style. So, that teacher knew the content but just didn't know what to do when certain kids miss certain subjects. So, how do you remediate them and keep them all moving forward while teaching new content—but it's really looking at what the teacher needs.

These ideas generated an in-depth conversation about intentionality of specific feedback provided to teachers because follow-through was deemed an important aspect of teacher professional growth. Keith explained, "I think follow-through is critical…you're able to provide, well, textbook definition, feedback; timely, specific, and actionable." Susan agreed, sharing, "When I do my observations I really strive to connect with my teachers the very next day. I don't like to, you know, observe them and not give them any feedback, you know, right away." Charles's statement also aligned with these ideas: "So, being able to communicate…about what expectations are and how to effectively move toward best practices." Likewise, Emily shared, "Even finding the time for those follow-up conversations. I hate it when they get pushed down the road or rescheduled, that really bothers me. I think that needs to happen pretty soon." Ultimately, the consensus was that providing feedback to teachers and implementing strategies such as modeling and coaching for their improvement is essential.

General Teaching Practices. Because many of the assistant principals interviewed supervised areas outside of their area of expertise, falling back on general teaching practices and techniques surfaced. Their general look-fors while observing and working with teachers focused on universal instructional strategies, including:

- student engagement,
- interactions among students and teachers,
- classroom management,
- student and teacher relationships,
- whether there was a sense of trust and respect in the classroom,
- student ownership of learning,
- student voice,
- collaboration among students,
- positive classroom learning environment,
- established routines and procedures,
- use of reflective questions during the lesson,
- determining if a lesson was broken down into chunks,
- on-task behavior,
- whether learning was accessible for all students,
- transitions,
- questioning techniques,
- observation of lesson components,
- what the students are doing, and
- whether activities are engaging for students.

Many participants suggested they could be an instructional leader without having to be highly qualified in the content areas they supervised.

Instructional leaders who were unfamiliar with the content leaned on their ability to identify good instruction as well as quality teaching practices in the classroom. Several participants shared comments related to observing general teaching practices (Table 2). They described the importance of the instructional leader providing general overall support. The main idea derived from participants was that good instruction is good instruction, regardless of the content area supervised.

Table 2

Participant Comments of Supporting Teachers Through General Teaching Practices

Participant	Quotation
Amy	"I think if you're a solid and good instructional leader…and you are aware of the instructional practices that are going to be supportive of the population, you can be a strong instructional leader without being highly qualified in the content area."
Cindy	"So, for example, if I went into a classroom, I would hope that they're doing some kind of warm-up and focusing on previous learning material. Transitions are pretty smooth and they're not just going on different tangents. You know: How are they assessing students? How do they know the students got it? Are they using tools that are helping student growth or are they just using tools to use tools? Is there like a lot of direct instruction going on? What else could they do better? How are they wrapping it up? Those kinds of things, that's just the basic structure."
Eric	"I feel I'm qualified with the instructional aspects, obviously. I mean, I don't know advanced calculus or Arabic, but…as far as understanding the [state standards], understanding teaching practices on what to look for in classrooms. I feel like I'm qualified in that area and working with teachers instructionally…Maybe not on the content, I mean, understanding the content…I can read what the curriculum is, but I'm not highly qualified to teach all of that obviously, but the instructional part I feel good with."
David	"[The principal] definitely pushes me to reflect on…to not get too caught up that I don't know all of the high school content and curriculum…but really pushes me to remember that good instruction is good instruction…I mean, I'm not a history expert, but I know what good instruction is."
Nancy	"I mean, good teaching is good teaching, doesn't matter the content."
Joe	"It goes back to good instruction across the curriculum…Good instruction is good instruction no matter what the subject."
Emily	"My work with teachers is based much more around universal instructional strategies, high-yield strategies, how to engage students, classroom management, high order thinking and questioning…If I observe a math class, it is true, I don't spend the time learning and educating myself about whether the content is on pace and how I can offer feedback specific to content where I am not an expert. I do so in the subject areas where I feel qualified."
Keith	"I don't see a huge challenge with the content piece because, and I hate to say like, I don't want to sound doom and gloom here, but I really think we have an issue in education…if you're not engaging kids at all, I don't know if we need to talk about content. Like if you think standing at the board 'sage on the stage' is getting it done, it doesn't matter what the content is. We have to start getting you to understand what engagement looks like and what, how the brain works and how we're getting kids. So, I think there's a lot of work to be done with that."

Participants shared that general teaching practice look-fors associated with supporting teachers in a non-content-focused manner through observations and how to provide general support for teachers was also relevant. They talked about several ways they provided support to teachers, including:

- acting as a role model,
- helping teachers build their confidence,
- providing general strategies for helping teachers grow professionally,
- building trusting relationships with teachers,
- focusing on a teamwork approach,
- working collaboratively with others,
- being a good listener,
- promoting self-reflection of teachers,
- being visible and approachable,
- using quality observations in areas they are familiar with to support areas of limited content knowledge, and
- strategically supporting teachers in an unobtrusive manner.

Eric focused on being visible in the building and strengthening relationships with teachers: "I think it helps if…you're seen out in the building…I think I'm pretty good at building relationships with teachers and being able to have…conversations with them." Susan mentioned collaboration, saying, "I do have a very good rapport with my teachers, even if it's something that I see we can work on, that we can build upon. I try to direct it in a way that we're working together." Finally, April provided insight into supporting a teacher in a discreet manner, sharing, "I strategically moved her classroom so she was beside some positive, strong people...Get them

out of the dungeon, get them out of the negative and put them with other people who will support [them].” Participants provided general support for teachers, exemplifying ways instructional leaders could directly influence teachers even if they were unable to support in a fully content-focused manner.

The Influence of a Highly Qualified Status as a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

Although many of the interviewees leaned on their instructional leadership techniques to support teachers using general teaching practices, their thoughts of being content-focused instructional leaders posed numerous challenges. Conversations related mostly to limitations of their lack of content knowledge in one or more areas supervised. Other areas highlighted as challenges were time management around content-focused instructional leadership and working with adult learners. These individual causes promote interference of the leader’s ability to perform aspects of the job at maximum effectiveness.

Obstacle Interference of Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Some of the obstacles participants mentioned were not being seen as a knowledge holder of the content, observing lessons without specific content knowledge, inability to provide meaningful content-focused feedback in conversations with teachers around content, difficulty of the level of content in high school, understanding if material within a lesson is accurate and whether students are reaching a certain level of knowledge attainment, and the instructional leader falling back on areas where they are familiar and limiting time with specific content teachers. Participants shared evidence of the many obstacles and challenges they encountered when working with teachers as content-focused instructional leaders (Table 3).

Table 3

Challenges Associated With Being a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

Participant	Quotation
David	"I would like to, to know more, do more, be a content expert in…all content areas, but I can't, so I think that's a weakness."
Dawn	"I think it's hard when you don't know the content, like, you know good teaching practices, and you can look for those, and that's fine, but I personally feel like that it is a struggle sometimes to…judge someone on content when I don't have the background…not knowing the content area…that's sometimes a struggle when you don't feel like you're a master in that material."
Jack	"I think it really comes up to being aware of my inadequacies, if that makes sense, in an area that I'm not considered highly qualified…I would be the first to tell you I was not highly qualified."
Grace	"So, there's this other layer and place where [teachers] can get their resources, but there isn't anybody else who can give a lunch detention or process the tardy or do the attendance meeting…or do the master schedule…I don't really always push back on that because then that leaves my work undone…maybe in order to do the dynamite lesson that they worked with the content person on, they need somebody to handle like…behavior, right? They need somebody to set a boundary around that part. So, the limitation for me would be that sometimes I fall back into those more comfortable roles."
Emily	"I'm sorry to say, it's not been content driven, rich discussion in math…probably what I offer in feedback about, that on an evaluation or at, after an observation is…based on…what I feel is, is good teaching, good use of time, good relationships with students, techniques where I feel students are…applying knowledge…I can't offer content. I'm not prepared."
Jacob	"I don't feel quite as, well, I don't feel strong specifically with content…When I go into a classroom, I can tell if you're a good teacher and I can tell what's going on, but if you specifically ask me a content question, I'm not sure I'm going to know."
Keith	"I think it really depends on the level of the subject. High school is much more challenging for me than middle school just because of the level of the material…I don't know all of the content…So I try to recognize when I'm not, for example, the conversation I have with the English teacher is much different than that with a math teacher, only because I might need them to provide the example, where in math, I would be able to provide the example."
Amy	"I can use the curriculum to help me understand and make sure that what the teacher is teaching is aligned to the standards, activities are aligned to the standards, and if the assessment is aligned to the activities, which is aligned to the curriculum, so I find that to be very challenging just because you don't know it, unless you've taught."
Cindy	"I think one of the hardest pieces is, so for science, I have, like physics and [Advanced Placement] physics and I don't know anything about those…I never taught AP courses. Some of the bigger challenges is to be able, for example, the AP classes, to provide feedback for them that is meaningful because I don't know the content."
Charles	"It's the understanding of the complexities of some of the content."

Participants described several other challenges. One of those included lack of feedback on the feedback the instructional leaders provided to their teachers. Emily explained her experience as "I haven't really gotten feedback about whether it's on point or on target or okay. Nobody said anything's wrong." She also expressed the lack of conversation with her principal around feedback she provides to teachers and whether her feedback is similar to the feedback other administrators provide to teachers. Additionally, there seemed to be an agreement of the lack of support assistant principals receive related to enhancing their ability as a content-focused instructional leader. Jacob noted, "I mean, I know probably in the last 5 or 10 years, there's not been content specific training." Amy shared a similar thought: "That's an area lacking for assistant principals…I can't say that we have had just [assistant principal] content development." Emily stated, "but as far as administrators and how to give content-specific feedback…I can't recall a time when something offered for administrators was different than for the teachers." Sara described her lack of professional development around content as well: "There's PD…for assistant principals…it's a larger focus on leadership. And so even in, I'm thinking about…if I ever received any PD that was content-focused…I'm going to say no." Nancy verified this need, saying, "I think that's something that our district can definitely grow in."

Another challenge participants described was the time constraint to learn about unfamiliar content as well as balance of time for being an instructional leader. The amount of time to dig into content of unfamiliar areas was described as almost nonexistent. Participants expressed concern about having sufficient time to work with teachers on instruction and be in classrooms due to being called to so many other aspects of their position. Lack of attention to these details leads to challenges where assistant principals begin to fall back on general teaching practices of observation and support of teachers. Their time to discuss content-focused

instructional leadership techniques with other administrators is also limited. April said she wished she had more time to meet with subject areas individually but time limited her ability to do so. Eric mentioned each day could be scheduled with specific items to accomplish, but at the end of the day many things could impede his progress and minimize his efforts to get any of his scheduled items complete. Joe stated, "My constraints of doing discipline and supervision, you know, the day, the school day is not set up to have interaction between administration and teachers in a productive way." Jacob suggested his time with teachers was limited because of the number of teachers he must support. He also included information about his lack of attention to instructional leadership: "There are many more days that I walk out of this building that I have done nothing instructionally. It's very difficult…there's times…instruction goes by the wayside because I'm dealing with so many other things." He continued, "To be quite honest…and this is so bad to say, but…kids are learning. Teachers are getting students to understand the content and students can show mastery, [so] we just kinda move on, ya know?"

Other participants had similar thoughts as well. Amy agreed her time was limited, although she would like to have time to get into classrooms. Susan suggested balance was a struggle, noting that "it's very difficult to try to balance being an instructional leader." April agreed, saying "So, I almost feel like there's not enough time built into a schedule to sit down with teachers." She also expressed frustration with other priorities taking away her time:

> Time management used to be a really good strength of mine, but up here [in high school] it's not. You get pulled in so many different directions, and I can have a great list, but it rarely ever gets done. I mean, I missed a meeting today with a math teacher cause I got yanked into an emergency meeting about graduation and I was going to meet with the math teacher to go over some data.

Time is minimized in the high school setting for instructional leaders, particularly time for assistant principals to grow as professionals, discussing ideas with other administrators. Jacob suggested time to have these conversations was an area where leadership development could improve: “But you know what, I can tell you, there’s some, there’s some great conversations when administrators can just sit together and talk but unfortunately we don’t, we don’t get that opportunity often.”

The last challenge generated as a theme of the study was working with adult learners in the assistant principal position. The idea of empathizing with teachers and understanding the aspects of their position and not forgetting what it was like to be in the classroom was a key takeaway. Jack described his empathy around working with teachers: “I feel all too often, there are people who once they get out of the classroom are very quick to disassociate themselves from memories of being in that classroom.” He went on to describe how he tries to overcome this barrier by remembering what it was like in the classroom and to understand the day-to-day of the classroom teacher position. Sara shared her experience of letting go of the idea that she does not have to be the expert and is open to the idea of the classroom teacher being willing to teach the instructional leader.

Grace described her experience as challenging as well, saying, “Working with adult learners is different because they give you fewer chances to mess up and they’ll forgive you less for it than kids will.” She went on to describe a specific example: “When a…35-year-old assistant principal walks into somebody’s class who’s been teaching for 35 years…and you’re going to give…feedback, that’s a delicate dance, right? Because what you want is for that feedback to land.” Additionally, Emily struggles at times when working with teachers due to their resistance. “Adults are hard…when you take something to an adult that you need to

change…having somebody not take such a personal emotional offense or be so defensive about a change that needs to happen…adults are not easy." Overall, interviewees expressed multiple challenges within their position; one participant, Nancy, included a final consideration for content-focused instructional leaders: "Once you dig into one content, you might not be in charge of that content next year. So that might be something…schools need to think about."

Supports to Enhance Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Many participants were transparent about not being not content experts in all of the subjects they supervised; they were honest with teachers so teachers would be aware of their shortcomings. Cindy stated, "It is being honest and knowing that I'm learning." Some of the conversations indicated that participants were dedicated and willing to learn and grow as a leader in the content areas they supervised. Nancy suggested her strategy of overcoming obstacles as "the dedication of trying to learn more about the content. I think that's important…If you're not investing that time and that dedication to the content, I don't think that you can be…an effective content instructional leader." Jack shared a related thought: "And also personally being able to say I don't fully understand this area fully…so that's just like striving to be the best I can be for the teacher and the students." Amy provided a thought aligned with the other comments as well, saying, "If you're a strong leader…you're honest with your departments. I found that even though, I mean there's some departments that I may not have taught…but you're a strong instructional leader because you're telling me these things." Honesty and willingness to fill in the gaps where needed was expressed in many different ways. Cindy shared her ideas about staying abreast of the current knowledge of the content as she works with her teachers. "I think I owe it to my teams to make sure that I am up-to-date and, you know, that I'm growing alongside them." Participants also suggested the importance of leaning on internal and external content experts to

support the content focus of their leadership. The supports included teachers and teacher leaders as content experts, department or content leads, instructional team leaders, content-focused professional learning communities led by effective leaders, district-level content instructional specialists, coordinators, curriculum leaders, coaches, and the principal.

Although participants reported various resources to enhance their role of support as a content-focused instructional leader, the first was trusting teachers to be content experts of their curriculum. Jack described teachers as the primary knowledge holders of the content, saying, "We hire professionals, we hire the teachers to be the professionals…to teach the students…We hire them to be the content leaders within our building." Grace also shared the expectation of the instructional leader needing support from the teacher, noting, "I think first asking the teachers is a great place to start because they know, and I'm not afraid for them to know that I don't understand because they don't expect me to know." David expressed a similar thought: "I don't know everything about all the nuances of the curriculum. But then again, I trust the teachers to be the content experts and I'll be the instructional leader, that coach."

In particular, participants relied on veteran and effective teachers to support newer and less effective teachers due to valuing their expertise and experience. Nancy described how veteran teachers support their colleagues through participating in peer observations and evaluations. Joe shared the idea of his veteran teachers supporting other teachers as well: "It's not unusual to refer a teacher to other teachers in their curriculum area to seek suggestions and do observations." Sara uses a strategy with her teachers where high quality teachers are observed by those within and outside of their content area:

> One of the big things that I love to do is I love to take a newer teacher, or it could be a seasoned teacher, and have them observe their peers. It doesn't even necessarily have to

> be in their content. Good instruction is good instruction. And so, a lot of times I think it's a really good practice to let English teachers look at what's going on in a math classroom, in a science classroom, because sometimes…that can assist you in your differentiation.

Participants also spoke about the importance of teacher leaders, department leads, department heads, or content leads, instructional team leaders, and leaders of content-focused professional learning communities. These content experts were recognized for their leadership of conversation around the content, providing focused support to team members, teaching and modeling effective best teaching practices, creating a safe space for content teachers, providing non-evaluative feedback through peer evaluations to support new or teachers in need of support, facilitation of pacing and assessment, and being a network of assistance and encouragement for their teachers. Sara explained support she received from a department chair, saying, "I had to work with the department chair, and I feel like if you're open, honest, approachable, I had to allow them in the beginning to kind of teach me…the foundation."

When assistant principals work with the informal leaders in the building, it provides a way for them to connect with the content without having to be the expert. Joe described one way teacher leaders allowed their content teams to grow:

> And the other thing that our instructional team leader in English I think has done a great job is when they have a department meeting [it] is opened with a teacher presenting a successful lesson that they've used. So, it goes through the whole [department], over the course of the year, then all teachers have the opportunity or expectation to present a lesson that…is successful. So they learn. I love the idea of teachers learning from teachers.

David described acknowledgement of informal leaders as an important aspect within the school. "In our situation, we have to trust our master teachers and our department leads [and] trust our content experts to really help us. But that builds a great…kind of culture, too." Eric characterized informal leaders as "a good source of knowledge…within the departments." Keith explained how his school provided content support for teachers:

> From high school…it's really hard, you know, it's like a tangled web. Your [professional learning community] participation, you know, you might have a teacher in Algebra and Geometry…and you have another teacher that is Geometry and Algebra II…what we try to do is really have one leader for each of those subjects and then the others are in and out of those PLCs as the schedule allows…the goal would be for [the subject leader] to become an instructional leader for each PLC…It's probably not as formulated and structured as it should be, but it's a good start.

District-level support was yet another formal resource described as a way to support teachers when the assistant principal has limited content knowledge. Those in this position include content specialists, coordinators, supervisors, curriculum leaders, and instructional coaches. April expressed how the instructional coach might not be knowledgeable of specific content knowledge of every subject, but could enhance teaching strategies: "[The instructional coach] can give you a framework of how to do things and then you can put your content into it." Conversely, formal content-focused leaders can offer many resources for teachers, including support of content, opportunities for modeling and co-teaching, answering questions, locating resources necessary for teacher success, and sometimes attending content professional learning community meetings with teachers. Joe stated his need for their support over supervising content in unfamiliar areas, saying, "I rely on them for the instructional curriculum support." Similarly,

Emily shared, “They moved to a model where there is a supervisor in charge of each core area and fine arts…and these folks are wonderful resources. They’re very knowledgeable. They’re very up-to-date. I absolutely can lean on them.” Cindy also mentioned coordinators as a valuable resource, noting, “The other thing is where we’re very blessed to have coordinators…and they, they really help to fill in the gaps. So yes, I’ve been very blessed with that for all of the questions that I haven’t known this year.” District-level support was an important resource for many participants. District leaders could step in and support teachers and have conversations around content where some of the assistant principals lacked content knowledge of specific curriculum areas.

Finally, the principal was perceived as a support for instructional leadership. Participants described the principal as a mentor figure, someone who encouraged professional readings around instruction for purposes of collaborative discussions, and someone who designated specific times for assistant principals to be instructional leaders. Principals also supported instructional leadership by stressing the importance of assistant principals being in the classroom with teachers, dedicating time for the administrative teams to discuss ideas related to instruction, valuing instructional leadership, encouraging leaders to enhance their content knowledge of the subjects they supervise, supporting the autonomy of assistant principals as they supervise multiple departments, and pairing the assistant principal with familiar content related to their background and experience. The principal was also seen as someone who is open-minded, communicates effectively, and provides a support system to their assistant principals. They were also viewed as valuing a team approach and challenging assistant principals on their team to move out of their comfort zone to enable professional growth as an instructional leader. Dawn described her principal as a support system who wants administrators in classrooms: “She

understands how busy we are with all of our other duties as well, but she also stresses the importance of making sure that you're out in the classrooms." Amy describer her principal as a strong leader, saying, "I value [my principal]; her expertise and insight are extremely valuable. And I think that's a key piece, too, is strong leadership at the top." Nancy recounted her experience of working with her principal as one where instruction is valued. "We communicate about what we've observed that week, what engaging strategies we've seen, and he's always asking us for what support we need to help us grow." Amy expressed how her principal protected time for assistant principals to get into classrooms:

> The way it is run is that this day is your day. You do the observations and the other [assistant principals] and the principal pick up the slack…she feels very strong about instruction and instructional practices…It's very easy, as you know, to get into a classroom to start observing, and there goes your walkie off: "I need an administrator to room whatever. I need an administrator in the cafeteria." So, I greatly appreciate that she values our time and the instruction.

Some principals also integrated time for the administrative leadership teams at schools to collaborate with district coordinators to align the content focus in their buildings. Amy explained, "We actually have a meeting time [with coordinators] that we actually meet and talk about instruction, instructional practices. We're working towards developing a common language for moving forward, kind of revamping our [professional learning communities]." Similarly, Charles gave an example of collaboration of coordinators with building leaders:

> Yeah, so specifically in science, for example, our science coordinator…has a group of, essentially like a standing meeting…just to talk about hot topics for the time of year…[it's] also an opportunity to highlight specific content focus areas maybe that were

> weak for the school [district] in the past, maybe we want to strengthen, or we have new programs that we want to utilize. And that's a good opportunity for us to…meet with the coordinator who is well versed in the content specific areas.

Ultimately, many informal and formal content experts are valued for their expertise and commitment to support assistant principals in their journey of supervising multiple content areas.

Self-Efficacy of the Assistant Principal as a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

Participants' spoke about their confidence levels related to instructional leadership. While many referenced being less confident in areas where they had minimal content knowledge, personal confidence was based on supervision of content areas previously taught. Several participants felt increased confidence as an instructional leader when they supervised a content area in which they had background knowledge. Others suggested their confidence increasing based on passion and interest related to having a personal connection and comfort level with the subject they supervised.

Self-Confidence of Being a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

Dawn provided insight to her experience, sharing, "I mean, I'll be honest, like I feel much, much more confident going into an English observation since I did it for so long than I do going into any other type of observation." She also mentioned her anxiety and discomfort when observing unfamiliar subject areas. Nancy had a similar thought, even though math was not a focus area of supervision for her: "I was very passionate in math, so if I supervise math, I would probably feel a lot more comfortable in that. But at this school we don't get to choose what areas we supervise. We're just kind of told." Likewise, Sara's confidence level reflected her personal connection and experience.

> I just have a personal connection with the arts that makes it easier because I know when I go into an orchestra classroom and they're talking about keys and key signatures…I know it from my own personal experience. So, between my personal experience and then just my academic background, I would put arts, history, and English at a pretty high level of confidence. Those are things that if a teacher needs something instructionally, I could probably just go off the top of my head and not have to, and not have to think about it.

Conversely, two participants suggested no decrease in their confidence supervising areas where their background was unfamiliar. These participants fell back on general instructional teaching practices and relied on experts when focusing on content. David shared how he managed his confidence as a content-focused instructional leader, saying, "I may not know everything about the specific content, but I know the people that do in my building." Jack also shared his thoughts: "Not that I know the content, but it's that if I have questions in an observation, I know I can find the answer to it. It might take me a while, but I can find the answer to it." Instructional leaders' ability to use resources to support areas where they had limited content knowledge enhanced their support of teachers. Similarly, Jacob shared, "I'm very comfortable with instruction because you know, I think I've been in it long enough that I can go in and see good teaching and know what it is, or if someone was struggling."

In addition to participants explaining their confidence of supervising content areas in various ways, they also provided insight into their personal values and beliefs of being an effective instructional leader. Participants' personal values and beliefs suggested multiple ways of supporting teacher professional growth as a content-focused instructional leader. Examples included taking time to build positive relationships with teachers to gain their trust, taking time to get to know teachers, being accessible and approachable, fostering collaboration among

teachers, offering support and encouragement, creating an open line of communication, building a sense of mutual respect, valuing teachers' hard work and dedication, and being open to growing alongside them. Susan shared her experience of supporting her teachers:

> I believe that teachers generally want to have good instruction. I believe that teachers…do the best that they know to do. And as an instructional leader, it is my job to help them be able to improve or to continue to be the best that they want to be…I think that's just, that's just my role to just help them and help them improve and to go and be, you know, whatever they want to be as far as instruction is concerned.

Dawn and Nancy both viewed relationship- and trust-building as the most important components with teachers. Jack had a similar explanation of his focus around instructional leadership: "My number one personal belief…is I am there to support the teacher…and then after that I'm there to ensure [a] rigorous and high quality education…ensuring that there's rigorous content." Support for teachers was a high priority for most participants. Grace said, "We provide support and encouragement for [teachers] to, you know, improve and take that next step towards being masters of their craft." Joe concurred, sharing, "Well, I will tell you my mantra…to get up every morning with two things in mind: support teachers teaching and students learning. And that's why I get up every morning and come in here." Similarly, Emily shared, "I know that we hear it all the time, kids first…but kids will be first if teachers feel supported and to lever the power of a supported and confident and excellent teacher is…really very important." Participants valued supporting teachers and helping them grow as professionals within their career.

Teacher growth within the field of education is seen from the perspective of the instructional leader providing guidance and direction. Participants described their role in allowing teachers to take risks without repercussions and coaching them. The role was also

described as the instructional leader being an intentional listener and having courageous conversations with teachers to support their professional growth in thinking about what is best for students. Keith's provided insight into an assistant principal's toolbox of resources and how those resources can support teacher growth. He said growth is possible for anyone if the correct supports and monitoring are put in place. Cindy spoke about having uncomfortable conversations with teachers to support their professional growth in putting students' needs first:

> If you have some people that are struggling instructionally, having those hard discussions, even though you don't want to, it's going to be better for them and it's going to be better for the kids in the long run to do that, of course, respectfully and professionally.

Participants also talked about providing meaningful and specific feedback through post-observation conferences with teachers in a non-threatening manner as an important aspect of their position. Emily stated, "even good teachers need meaningful feedback that challenges them for growth." Participants suggested discourse among teachers of all levels, regardless of prior teaching experience, was important for teachers' professional growth. Instruction centered around student learning was a similar thought Emily shared, saying she liked to "engage in conversation with [the teachers] and dialogue to make sure what we're doing is, is supporting the students' needs and learning." Finally, Keith shared his experience working with the VDOE during an improvement phase to provide feedback for his teachers:

> I received an abundance of training through the VDOE at [my] Middle School because we were in improvement. And…not because of any innate ability I have, but because of the abundance of training I've been in, I feel like my learning curve was so much greater than it would have even been…we used to have to turn our feedback into the state to get

> feedback. We were getting feedback on our feedback, and we would get questions like, "Why did you script like that? Why did you do that?" Like all kinds of stuff...because of that training and like how intensely I had to look at like different pieces of instruction, I feel pretty confident going into any classroom, regardless of my content knowledge…I feel like I've been prepared maybe more so than the average administrator because of my experience…I just think it makes me reflect on what I'm typing, what data I have in my script. Am I making assumptions or is this factual?...I think all those things have helped me.

Although some participants gained confidence based on their experience, many suggested their administrative preparation programs lacked the components necessary for their leadership related to content or placement into their position. These ramifications affected their ability as a content-focused instructional leader. Some participants felt unprepared for the assistant principal position and felt they lacked the support necessary to become effective content-focused instructional leaders, conduct evaluations, and provide feedback. First, leaders shared their opinion of the lack of preparation for entry into the position of assistant principal consequently influencing their capacity as an instructional leader. Eric stated his opinion of the administrative program he attended: "No, I wouldn't say it really prepared me [for] when you walk into that role…it didn't prepare me for all of the things you're walking into." Jack made a similar comment, saying, "No, it did not…You go by the book when you're in, in school...I felt like the university prepared me for the…paper pushing, building aspect of our jobs." Likewise, David shared, "Heck no, I didn't come out prepared…I learned a whole lot more by just boots being on the ground." Finally, Dawn shared her experience of her administrative preparation program:

> Nothing prepares you for this job. Like, it just doesn't…they did a really nice job coming up with courses that they felt like…these things are going to be good to have in the back of your head, but holy crap, I mean, nothing prepared you for this job until you've actually done it…It's just a lot that you can't teach, that you just have to learn through experience.

Participants' administrative preparation programs affected their ability to supervise numerous content areas, particularly where some areas are deemed as unfamiliar based on limited background knowledge and experience. Jacob stated, "It prepared me to be an administrator…but content-focused, no." Sara agreed, saying there was "not a lot of…content level preparation." Charles shared his experience as well: "I don't think that my admin program prepared me to necessarily have strengths in the specific content areas that I'm in…I don't think that it fully prepared me for that." Susan questioned how this would actually take place in an administrative preparation program, saying, "So I'm not sure how we could cover all the, all those areas in the preparation program?" Emily shared her thoughts as well: "They didn't even prepare us to do an observation and give feedback. Zero! As far as courses go, law, finance, community, but not, not an observation and content and feedback, not content-focused instruction." Eric agreed, saying, "Maybe not as much…content knowledge. It dealt more with supervision and classroom stuff with teachers dealing with changes…As far as the content, you know, it didn't really delve into that aspect." Similarly, April stated, "I don't think any admin program has trained us enough to be instructional leaders. I mean, I'm going to put that out there. It's mainly been about how to run a building and how to manage people." She also felt unprepared for observing teachers and providing meaningful feedback. Nancy also mentioned content, saying, "So I think they prepared me to be an administrator and the different types of

things you would deal with on a day-to-day basis, but I never dug into different contents." Cindy stated, "I mean, you kind of get thrown into it and you're like…I've never really done this before…It's almost like being a first-year teacher…like you kind of learn things on the fly." The general consensus among participating assistant principals was that administrator preparation programs require changes to support aspiring leaders as content knowledge holders.

Aids to Support Self-Confidence as a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

Two main subthemes surfaced when speaking with participants about what they considered supports necessary to enhance their self-confidence related to being a content-focused instructional leader. First, participants suggested one important resource would be content-focused instructional support, including professional development around content for those supervising unfamiliar content areas. Participants also wanted more guidance related to working with teachers and overcoming obstacles related to their own lack of content knowledge in the areas they supervise. The second subtheme related to supporting self-confidence was consideration of time allotment and time management of the position related to focusing more on instruction. Although many responsibilities are associated with the assistant principal role, participants described ways that would influence building a sense of structure and balance in order to be a better content-focused instructional leader.

Content-Focused Instructional Support. Guidance and feedback to promote the effectiveness of the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader was a central theme that emerged from interviews. Participants suggested that credible knowledge holders at the district level could support assistant principals in their role of working with content areas at the high school level. David described the idea as having someone to support his leadership around content: "I would love it if our district did have credible and knowledgeable…highly

qualified content specialists at the district level, kind of a…go-to for help, to help me learn and grow." The idea of content knowledge holders at the district level led participants to suggest the idea of having content-focused professional development sessions with these formal leaders to support their professional growth. Jack stated how helpful it would be to have designated meeting times with content specialists to support his performance as an instructional leader over content:

> So I think it would be very helpful if central office would offer, even if it's just 1 day, half day, whatever it may be, where we can sit down and meet with the curriculum supervisors to know what their expectations are for the upcoming year.

These supports could provide advice for assistant principals around content-focused instruction, as suggested by Grace, who stated, "Discussion of elements of content areas that focus on what [assistant principals] should be looking for."

Sara suggested creating resources to support assistant principals around content, including development of a matrix for instructional leaders with limited background knowledge of a specific content area. The tool would include the ability to effectively evaluate someone in a specific content area where the assistant principal might have limited background knowledge. Nancy suggested having district-level specialists join in assistant principal training to enhance content knowledge and support for instructional leaders. "I definitely think that…some of these [assistant principal] trainings that we sit in, maybe they could…bring in the specialist or bring in more coordinators and have breakout rooms…I definitely think that's something we can grow in." Likewise, Sara further suggested working with teachers in specific content areas and needing aligned support provided in advance:

> If I'm a new assistant principal and I'm going into an English classroom, what am I

> supposed to be looking for? There's some terminology that you don't even know that you don't even know. And so I think…some training…[about] what evaluation of content looks like? What instruction in this content area looks like?

Similarly, Amy questioned the nonexistence of content-focused professional development. "Instructional coaches are going to [professional development] all the time on content and instructional practices. Why aren't [assistant principals]? If we're supposed to be the instructional leaders of our buildings, we have to have continuous [professional development] on that and we don't." Charles echoed the idea of professional development opportunities to help him support his teachers in a content-focused manner, saying, "It would be wonderful if you were a new supervisor for science, for example, if you had [professional development] opportunities to attend, you know, quarterly or monthly breakdowns of the standards...and look-fors."

Participants in this study worked toward excellence by seeking out resources to support their efforts around supervision of content. Although professional development supports leadership of content, one last suggestion was listening to the voice of assistant principals while providing guidance and feedback of their position. Jacob relayed his frustration about wanting specific support to be a content-focused instructional leader: "You know, I think there's lots of times that central office determines what kind of professional development you need and the folks that are in the trenches really don't have a say." Emily shared a similar reality, saying, "I would just like more, more guidance and more feedback for myself to know where I stand." A need exists to support assistant principals in the high school setting as they supervise instruction of specific content areas where they may have limited knowledge.

Time Allotment Focused on Instruction. Time was the second subtheme described as an aid to enhance self-confidence in supervising content. Participants valued time management in supporting teachers on an instructional level. One suggestion was to include time to focus on and work directly with teachers on content to support their professional growth. Participants shared that time to gain knowledge of unfamiliar content areas would allow them to maximize learning opportunities for students. Amy stated, "I would…value the time to learn more so I could go in and be even more of a support." Jacob agreed with this opinion, saying, "I do think we should spend more time on content." Eric also mentioned time management related to non-instructional tasks pulling him away from instruction: "It's just making sure you take the time and don't get swallowed up by the other things."

Participants needed time to be content-focused instructional leaders and time to focus on evaluation and feedback with content teachers. Joe wanted time to focus and engage with teachers in dialogue. He said time spent working with teachers had a positive influence; therefore, it "would…be such a benefit to be able to have time to dialogue with teachers, possibly engage in planning with teachers…I think the instruction itself would improve." Cindy agreed, saying,

> I just feel assistant principals, are, you have so many hats and I just feel that you don't get to be that instructional leader as much as you would want to because of things like in a normal year, discipline and those type, like you have an IEP meeting, you have this meeting, that kind of thing. So, I don't feel like you get to do that as much. So, time to be that instructional leader would be great.

Participants spoke about their desire for time allotted for training and implementation centered around evaluation and feedback and learning how to provide teachers with authentic content-

focused feedback. There was a consensus around learning the proper observation and feedback processes associated with supervising various content areas at the high school level. Working alongside colleagues and receiving feedback and support from each other was also mentioned. Emily explained how she wants to implement changes to better support her teachers: "I was frustrated by the lack of challenging feedback that I got as a teacher…And then the reality is I'm hypocritically just as guilty." Susan referenced how she would be better able to support her teachers moving forward if provided with proper training, saying, "To increase my performance, I feel that continuing to learn…strategies, and even on giving feedback to teachers. Those are the types of things that I think would help improve…my confidence."

Jacob had similar thoughts of what would support his foundation of becoming an instructional leader based on providing effective feedback for teachers. He shared,

> Having some updated training on going in and doing an observation, you know, when I started in administration…I was never trained about how to go in and do an observation or an evaluation. Now they gave us the form. We've talked about the form that you fill out…and they have things that are bullets that are under each of those categories…but as far as really what to look for, I mean, I've never been trained as an administrator to do that.

Emily's response was similar to Jacob's; she proposed a cohort for continued evaluation and feedback training of supporting teachers. Her suggestion involved having a mentor for a group of administrators who began around the same time who could support the feedback component of working with teachers in various content areas. Emily doubted whether finding someone to be such a mentor would be possible: "The problem is, it's really hard to find somebody who's willing to say, yeah, I've got this observation thing down and this content-focused

instruction…and feedback down and I would share it." Her proposed approach included sustainable mentorship over time rather than a one-time training. This would support continued professional growth and development for content-focused instructional leaders. Emily went on, "We provide mentors for teachers for a reason; it helps with attention [and] is very powerful to have somebody to go to who's not your direct supervisor." Time allotted to support this type of additional focus for assistant principals would provide an additional way to enhance their leadership of supervising unfamiliar content areas.

Finally, participants recommended the idea of time for collaboration among administrators. Speaking to other administrators about evaluation and feedback is rare due to limited time allotted for the numerous roles and responsibilities associated with the assistant principal position. Jacob noted the lack of time spent with other administrators on his team: "I can tell you…there's some great conversations when administrators can just sit together and talk, but unfortunately…we don't get that opportunity often." Dawn shared her desire to work with her colleagues:

> Just being able to bounce ideas off like other assistant principals or principals, you know, about how they…go in and do observations and what they're looking for and what strategies they use to suggest to people, you know, their struggles in various areas or whatnot.

Additionally, the idea of working together by observing teachers collectively was also mentioned. Both April and Emily discussed the importance of working collaboratively with their teammates during the observation and feedback process. April suggested that teachers observing one another was effective and thought the same could be true for administrators. She stated, "Why wouldn't we do that as administrators? Walk around with each other and observe rooms

and see what we saw. Cause then that's how you train your eye of what to look for and how to give feedback." Similarly, Emily shared,

> I know there was talk at one time about several administrators sitting in the same room and doing an observation and kind of calibrating some feedback and…just hearing each other talk about what they observed in the same lesson. I think that that would be really helpful.

Although time is a barrier to making these opportunities possible, April concluded, "I still believe you learn best from other colleagues."

Summary

In the findings section, I introduced three major categories found based on a critical analysis of the data. The first major category was the balance of roles and responsibilities associated with the assistant principal position. The three themes related to this category included additional instructional aspects of the assistant principal position, all other non-instructional duties associated with the position, and the role of the assistant principal as the instructional leader. Subthemes of the last theme presented ideas related to content-focused instructional leadership as well as general teaching practices.

The second major category was the impact of highly qualified status as a content-focused instructional leader. The two themes derived from this category included obstacle interference as a content-focused instructional leader as well as supports to enhance the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader. The third and final major category was self-efficacy of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. One of themes developed from this category included self-confidence as a content-focused instructional leader. The second theme considered aids to support assistant principals' self-confidence as a content-focused instructional

leaders. Subthemes related to the third theme in this category included content-focused instructional support as well as time allotment focused on instruction.

Ultimately, the major categories extracted from the data provide insight into common generalizations generated among participants. The findings support an integral component of research related to assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders in the high school setting. Chapter 5 includes how the overall findings generated from the participants relates to the research questions and the extensive literature review provided in the first part of the study. The final chapter provides an overview of the study and a synopsis major findings, how the findings relate to the literature, implications for assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders, implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks, including the emergent theory originating from the dissertation study.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

In this chapter, I present an overview of the entire research process, including the problem of the study, purpose statement, research questions, a review of the methodology, and synopsis of major findings revealed from the data. The next part of the chapter reveals how the findings are related to the literature. The final part of the chapter provides implications for assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders, implications for policy and practice, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks. The grounded theory that emerged from the overall findings through data collection and analysis is also shared.

Overview of the Problem

The expectation for assistant principals to be content-focused instructional leaders implies a focus around instruction, although other roles and responsibilities sometimes stand in the way. Because assistant principals have become an integral part of instructional leadership at the high school level, a critical examination of their position as content-focused instructional leaders is important. Many assistant principals supervise numerous content areas at one time; therefore, the ability to provide support within their position so they can be optimal content-focused instructional leaders for the teachers they supervise is paramount. Hassenpflug (2013) suggests an understanding of pedagogy is important to these leaders as well as an in-depth awareness of content knowledge to support teachers effectively. Unfortunately, many assistant principals become high school administrators without sufficient content knowledge related to the areas they are called on to supervise.

Lochmiller (2016) indicated the challenge these leaders face while supervising unfamiliar content areas is due to the departmentalized nature of the high school setting. If assistant

principals are to positively influence teaching and learning, it is essential to listen to their perspectives to determine what supports are necessary for their overall success (Petrides et al., 2014). The position lends itself to clerical and managerial duties but has also expanded to include supervision over specific content areas (Mattocks, 2016). Despite the need for the assistant principals to become content-focused instructional leaders, both Celikten (2001) and Lochmiller (2016) suggested there is minimal research around understanding the facets of the position. Consequently, there is a need for further research around assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders if they are to maintain the expectation as part of their position.

Purpose Statement

Minimal research of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders suggests a practical need to determine what is necessary to support those in the position (Celikten, 2001). Deficits and lack of formal training could promote low self-efficacy and directly affect the performance of instructional leaders (Mercer, 2016). With this study, I sought to understand the roles of selected high school assistant principals as they supervise instruction based on whether they were highly qualified in their supervisory content area. Furthermore, research efforts to expand the knowledge of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders are essential as the position is evolving and the middle space leader is seen as a catalyst for change (Lochmiller & Karnopp, 2016; Mattocks, 2016; Muñoz & Barber, 2011; Searby & Armstrong, 2016). Participants provided critical insight through their personal experiences and perspectives of the position.

Review of Research Questions

Two main research questions guided the study to uncover and explore the role of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. The first research question was, How and in

what ways do assistant principals who supervise instruction at the high school level make sense of their position depending upon whether they are highly qualified in the content area? And second, What is the relationship between an assistant principal's content area base of expertise and their self-efficacy around supervising a specific content area? A thorough analysis around these questions expectantly aids in examining the role of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. A grounded theory approach revealed interpretations based on participant perspectives. Ultimately, a theory was developed around assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders.

Review of Methodology

I used a grounded theory qualitative research method for the study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested grounded theory to incorporate discovery of a theory from an extensive analysis of data collected. Evidence of findings suggested the development of specific categories, themes, and subthemes. Grounded theory methodology requires the researcher to listen to the perspectives of those living in the experience. I conducted inductive examinations through interviews with each participant (e.g., Corley, 2015). Inductively generating findings using a grounded theory qualitative constant comparison method approach incorporates the discovery of personal perceptions and experiences of participants toward understanding a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mahdiuon et al., 2017). Several stages of coding were incorporated into the analysis phase of the data: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The cycle continued until data saturation was evident as similar themes were recurring (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method has the potential to explain certain situations and support a potential area in need of further investigation—in this case, assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Ultimately, Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained the importance of using the constant comparative method of grounded theory because it provides "a firsthand immersion into a sphere of life and action…[and] yields important dividends" (p. 226).

Grounded theory suggests participants are carefully selected for the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Two sampling techniques, purposive and snowball, provided the participants for the study. Purposive sampling is a non-random probability technique used where participants fit a specified criterion to be included in the study (Campbell et al., 2020). Participants who match the focus of the research study can improve the results of the study and provide reliable data (Campbell et al., 2020; Tongco, 2006). Snowball sampling is another non-random probability method used to recruit further participants (Glen, 2014; Naderifar et al., 2014). Glen (2014) defined snowball sampling as asking those already interviewed to enlist others in the same line of work to take part in a study.

I conducted 16 in-depth interviews with assistant principals at the high school level who supervise instruction in various content areas. During data collection, I completed ongoing and thorough analyses of interviews and continued to cycle ideas for consideration of identifying categories and themes. Ultimately, the findings explained selected assistant principals' experiences as instructional leaders of various content areas and whether they felt effective based on self-efficacy, or confidence, and the level of content knowledge they had related to the content areas they supervised. Research was a gradual process and data saturation drove completion of the research (Kalam et al., 2015; Naderifar et al., 2017).

Synopsis of Major Findings

Three main categories emerged from the data analysis. The first major category considered the balance of roles and responsibilities associated with the assistant principal

position. The three themes of this category included additional instructional aspects of the position beyond content-focused leadership, all other non-instructional duties associated with the position, and the role of the assistant principal as an instructional leader. The role of the assistant principal as an instructional leader emerged as two subthemes. These subthemes included content-focused instructional leadership and those in the position leaning on general teaching practices due to their lack of experience in and unfamiliarity with specific content areas.

The second major category was the influence of highly qualified status as a content-focused instructional leader. The two themes developed from this category were obstacle interference of content-focused instructional leadership as well as support to enhance assistant principals around content-focused instructional leadership. The third major category included self-efficacy of the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader. The two themes of this category were self-confidence of being a content-focused instructional leader and aids to support self-confidence as a content-focused instructional leader. The two subthemes of aids supporting self-confidence were content-focused instructional support and time allotment focused on instruction. Because three major categories emerged from the data collection and analysis, exploring how the findings relate to the literature is essential. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks as well as the research questions are discussed based on their relationship to the findings.

Findings Related to the Literature

Pressure and the demands associated with educational reform requires increased leadership preparation and development of assistant principals at the high school level, who are now seen as instructional leaders (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Levine, 2005; Ng & Chan, 2014). Although the role of assistant principal is typically overlooked and under researched, studies

such as this one, amplify the voices and perspectives of those in the position (Mattocks, 2016; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017). The assistant principal position at the high school level has evolved into one where supervision of content is a major component of the job. Glanz (1994) suggested the expansion of the position to include instructional leadership focused on support of the teaching and learning process. Ultimately, leadership has become a shared responsibility between the principals and the assistant principals. The transition has developed into one of collaboration where the assistant principal influences student achievement through an increased role related to instructional leadership (Gurley et al., 2015; Militello et al., 2015). The findings are now revealed in relation to the literature review to determine overlap and discrepancies based on the outcome of the study.

Connection of Research and Findings to the Balance of Roles and Responsibilities

The assistant principal position is not limited to instructional duties; it encompasses managerial duties as well. The first main category generated through data analysis of participant responses is the idea of balance of the roles and responsibilities associated with the assistant principal position. Previous researchers have suggested the roles and responsibilities associated with the position overstretch the leader, who might become consumed beyond what time allows (Cranston et al., 2004; McKenzie & Varney, 2018). Armstrong (2015) argued newly hired administrators sometimes struggle due to the transition into an unfamiliar position. A general theme I found related to the burden of other non-instructional duties associated with the position, a finding consistent with previous research.

Additional Instructional Aspects of the Position

A few participants highlighted special education as an additional instructional aspect of their position. Supervision over special education tended to pull them away from supervision

over specific content areas. Loss of time for content-focused instructional aspects was the most frequent generalization related to special education. The importance of following policies and procedures associated with placing special education before other aspects of instructional leadership was a common finding among participants. Although special education was not a general overall instructional component associated with pulling the assistant principal away from instruction generated in the literature review, it was a focal point within the findings.

All Non-Instructional Duties Associated With the Position

Ideas related to non-instructional duties associated with the position emerged during the study, linking directly to previous research indicating continuous pressure of the assistant principal position. When the assistant principal takes on a plethora of responsibilities that are not prioritized, the leader typically becomes lost in what to do next (Mercer, 2016). Participants in this study felt uneasiness and were overwhelmed when trying to find balance for their many roles; most of their time was focused on operational and managerial aspects of the position. Oleszewski et al. (2012) suggested the same idea relating to the issue of the assistant principals becoming the chief disciplinarian of the school. Participants in this study said discipline was a considerable time-consumer and something that could take up most of the day, pulling them away from instruction.

Beyond discipline, the most frequent duties participants mentioned dealt with school operations, student attendance, and transportation. Several other highlighted areas were oversight of new teachers, school programs, school safety, development of the master schedule, supervision of students, after-school coverage, and addressing students and families on an as-needed basis. Most of these ideas were captured in previous research which references non-instructional duties, such as hall, bus, and cafeteria duty; handling student discipline; monitoring

attendance; oversight of school activities; and completing office work (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Shore & Walshaw, 2018).

The Role as an Instructional Leader

The last finding entails the instructional leadership role of an assistant principal. Findings suggest assistant principals fall into one of two main subthemes as instructional leaders. The first subtheme is that of being a content-focused instructional leader. The second subtheme suggests disassociation with the subjects supervised; in other words, the instructional leader leans heavily on general teaching practices when working with teachers of various contents. Participants suggested a total of 38 supervisory areas where they were not highly qualified according to the criteria set forth by the VDOE. Although they were all qualified with licensure of administration and supervision, only 13 out of 51 areas were supervised by instructional leaders who were highly qualified in that area. Those in the position are challenged to supervise unfamiliar content areas at the high school level (Pedrides et al., 2014).

Content-Focused Instructional Leadership. Proper training, selection, induction, continued support, and professional development for assistant principals are needed (Cranston et al., 2004). Participants indicated that familiarity of specific content areas due to previous educational experience was an important aspect of being a content-focused instructional leader. This is similar to Stein and Nelson (2003), who argued that the a thorough understanding of the academic subject supervised and identifying how students and teachers become learners and make connections within and among content are critical. Just as participants shared their success of supervising familiar content areas was based on their familiarity of the subject, Shaked et al. (2019) suggested how familiarity of content knowledge ultimately influences the effectiveness of a content-focused instructional leader.

Participants suggested various strategies similar to those presented in previous research. Some of these include working alongside the teacher, modeling, building trust and allowing teachers to take risks, providing meaningful feedback to teachers, assistance of supporting teachers as they monitor student progress and helping teachers generate high-yield teaching practices (Lochmiller, 2016; Lochmiller et al., 2012; Neumerski et al., 2018; Searby et al., 2017; Shazer et al., 2014). Findings also emphasized the need for alignment of standards and learning objectives specific to the concept taught (e.g., Reitzug et al., 2008). Participants suggested strategies such as look-fors and specific, clear learning objectives with some type of formal assessment to use for data collection and reflection. Data collection should include opportunities for content-focused instructional leaders to promote discourse with the teacher to determine if, indeed, there was an alignment of standards, learning objectives, and student performance outcomes (Reitzug et al., 2008).

Participants agreed content-focused instructional leaders need time to discuss instructional practices and promote collaboration; similar structures were also mentioned in the literature (Lochmiller, 2016; Shatzer et al., 2014). Data-driven leadership allows an opportunity to focus on student learning and work with teachers who might need additional support (Lochmiller, 2016). Participants suggested that feedback is critical for the improvement of teaching and supports student learning. Further, they suggested immediate feedback should be timely, specific and actionable, therefore triggering conversations with teachers to support their professional growth. Similarly, Boston et al. (2017) suggested an instructional leader's competence to identify both effective and ineffective teaching practices of their teachers provides opportunities for individualized differentiation.

Content-focused instructional leader should be knowledgeable of the content they supervise and competent in their ability to promote discourse to enhance instructional decisions with teachers (Searby et at. 2017). When leaders are out of their comfort zone and do not possess a background knowledge of a particular subject area, participants suggested seeking support and immersing themselves into the subject area as much as time allows. Although this can be a daunting task, general supervisory behaviors are typically consistent, whereas the content focus component of instructional leadership tends to go unnoticed (Lochmiller, 2016; Lochmiller et al., 2016). Those in the position who supervise content areas they are unfamiliar with tend to redirect their attention to general teaching practices when supporting teachers. Thus, the direction of support provided to teachers moves away from content and toward general teaching practices.

General Teaching Practices. The second subtheme suggests disassociation with the teachers participants supervised, resulting in the instructional leader leaning heavily on general teaching practices when working with teachers of various content areas. General teaching practices participants shared include general observation look-fors, including universal instructional strategies such as student engagement, interactions and relationships among teachers and students, classroom management, student voice, a sense of trust and respect in the classroom, collaboration among students, a positive classroom learning environment, established routines and procedures, lesson sequence, on-task behavior, transitions, and determining whether the teacher incorporates engaging activities for students.

Previous researchers have suggested that assistant principals fall back on these areas due to the challenge that arises for them when they are unfamiliar with the content, making it difficult to support teachers with a direct content focus (Lochmiller, 2016; Louis et al., 2010). Participants suggested leaning toward what they referred to as “good instruction” and quality

teaching practices when the subject matter is unfamiliar to them. Overall, participants concluded that "good instruction is good instruction," regardless of the content area supervised. Assistant principals not being highly qualified in all content areas they supervise at the high school level is a previously documented reality (Mendels, 2012). Similarly, the idea of leaning on general teaching practices to support teachers when assistant principals lack knowledge related to the content area they are supervising (Shaked et al., 2019).

Participants also shared their perspectives of administrative preparation programs and whether they felt equipped for the position. The unanimous discovery suggested a lack of preparing leaders for the assistant principal position, specifically related to supervising teachers in specific content areas at the high school level. Thoughts were shared suggesting minimal support in content supervision and how to evaluate effectively and provide meaningful feedback to teachers. Previous researchers have noted minimal preparation for assistant principals related to instructional responsibilities associated position and the skills necessary to promote high-quality teaching and learning (Boston et al., 2017; Carver et al., 2010).

Undergraduate teacher certification programs focus mainly on content knowledge, but administrative preparation programs seldom do (Hassenpflug, 2013; Steele et al., 2015). A general consensus discovered in the findings suggested administrative preparation programs should include content support to enhance assistant principals' competence when working directly with teachers in the high school setting. Leadership preparation programs should integrate a content focus to enable leaders to effectively supervise areas that are unfamiliar based on their background (Lochmiller et al., 2012). Previous researchers have suggested teachers value meaningful feedback related to content from their supervisors (Lochmiller, 2016). This feedback is curtailed when the leader has limited content knowledge of the subjects they

supervise (Lochmiller, 2016). Lochmiller (2016) argued the importance of the instructional leader being acclimated with the content areas they supervise. Ultimately, support is required if assistant principals are to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively lead instruction at the high school level (Boston et al., 2017).

Connection of Research and Findings of a Highly Qualified Status in a Content Area

Challenges assistant principals face at the high school level related to content-focused instructional leadership are commonly overlooked (Timperley, 2005). Many participants from this study acknowledged these challenges, falling back on using general teaching practices in content areas when they felt insecure. Because the intention of the content-focused instructional leader is to have a sufficient understanding of the curriculum to determine whether learning is occurring, this can pose a challenge to those with minimal content knowledge (Walstrom & Louis, 2008). Participants admitted their shortcomings due to their lack of content knowledge in one or more subject areas supervised. Unfortunately, challenges arise for administrators unfamiliar with specific content areas where they are not highly qualified, limiting their ability to provide support in all discipline areas (Lochmiller, 2016; Lochmiller et al., 2010).

Obstacle Interference of Content-Focused Instructional Leaders

Previous researchers have suggested limited content knowledge interferes with the ability to be an effective instructional leader (Carraway & Young, 2015). Participants in this study shared similar thoughts, sharing obstacles related to not being seen as the knowledge holder who could support the teacher, observing without knowing what to look for related to content, an inability to provide meaningful content-focused feedback, and the difficulty of content supervised at the high school level. Leaders with limited content knowledge often limit the amount of time they set aside to work on instruction due to their lack of content knowledge,

instead focusing on other non-instructional aspects of the position (Carraway & Young, 2015). Participants acknowledged this idea and suggested they would fall back on more comfortable roles within the position, limiting the time they spent with teachers focused on content.

Participants' ideas aligned with previous research in that many of them wanted to be a content expert in all of the subjects they supervised, but they understood this was not realistic. Mendels (2012) suggested secondary schools acknowledge the unreasonableness of assistant principals being content-focused instructional leaders in all of the disciplines they supervise. Ultimately, schools should hire leaders who meet specific qualifications as well as those who are instructionally sound to be able to support teaching and learning (Hassenpflug, 2013). Participants described lack of support related to feedback they provide to their teachers around content as an obstacle. Many also wished they could provide content-focused feedback to enhance their ability to become a better content-focused instructional leader. Support is essential if assistant principals are to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to effectively lead instruction (Boston et al., 2017). Steele et al. (2015) suggested effective instructional leaders support teachers through observation; provide meaningful, content-specific feedback; and guide teachers toward continued professional growth.

Because high schools are typically departmentalized, Lochmiller (2016) states leaders should take time to enhance their content knowledge in order to support teachers. Participants in this study described the challenge of insufficient time to learn about unfamiliar content while trying to balance all of the other aspects associated with the position. A similar challenge was finding time to work with teachers; participants often focused on general teaching practices. An overall consensus was that lack of time associated with instruction impeded participants' ability to work directly with teachers where content was the main topic of discussion.

Participants also suggested working with adult learners was an obstacle. Previous researchers have not found working with adult learners to hinder the effectiveness of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. Challenges related to working with adult learners included not being the content knowledge holder, being a much younger assistant principal supervising an area where a teacher had many years of experience, attempting to evaluate a teacher without the background knowledge of content, dealing with the sensitive emotions of adults, and supervising different content areas each year. Many participants found building trust and relationships with teachers as a way to work with them as they wanted the teachers to understand they remembered what it was like to be in the classroom.

Support to Enhance Content-Focused Instructional Leadership

Due to increased pressure from the state and federal government, shared leadership among administrators and networking among informal and formal competent knowledge holders is necessary to take on the collective responsibility of improving instruction (Carraway & Young, 2015; Louis et al., 2010). Establishing community while including informal and formal leaders emphasizes the importance of shared work around instruction (Louis et al., 2010). Participants shared that they were honest with the teachers they supervised, letting them know their limitations of not being the content experts of all subjects supervised. They also indicated they were willing to learn the content, but ultimately they wanted to lean on the support of content experts to best support their teachers. Interweaving multiple stakeholder influence has the potential to support teacher professional growth (Quong & Walker, 2010).

Participants described several internal supports to enhance the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader, including teachers as content experts. Teachers have the potential to enhance the teaching and learning process based on their content knowledge and

experience (Lochmiller, 2016). When the assistant principal works directly with content teachers, they keep from having to go it alone (Mendels, 2012; Neumerski, 2012). Participants suggested school leaders should trust the teachers as professionals to be the content experts. Veteran teachers were also mentioned for their expertise in supporting not only the instructional leader but also their colleagues in need of support.

Teacher leaders (e.g., department leads, department heads, content leads, instructional team leaders, and leaders of specific content professional learning communities) were also acknowledged as informal leaders who enable instructional support. Teacher leaders teach and lead in order to influence the practice of their colleagues (Louis et al., 2010; Neumerski, 2012; Smith et al., 2017). Leadership involvement of the assistant principal and the teacher leader has the potential to form a positive collaborative network (Klar, 2012). Participants recognized the importance of collaboration with their teacher leaders, including their leadership of conversation around the content, providing content-focused support to team members, teaching and modeling effective teaching practices, establishing a safe space for content teachers to work collectively, providing non-evaluative support for new or struggling teachers, and acting as a facilitator to discourse around pacing and assessment with the content team. Collaborating with a teacher leader provides a way for assistant principals to connect with the content without having to be the content expert. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) argued that designing a support system to incorporate others in the teaching and learning process is critical.

Formal leaders, such as content specialists and instructional coaches, were also highlighted in previous research as those who have the knowledge and skills necessary to fill content gaps of the instructional leader (Leithwood et al., 2008; Mette & Riegel, 2018). I found district-level support to include content specialists and instructional coaches as well as content

supervisors, coordinators, and curriculum leaders. Regardless of the title, all of these formal leaders supported an assistant principal who had limited content knowledge of a specific subject area. These leaders support instruction related to content, model and co-teach with teachers, provide resources for teacher success related to content, and support teachers by attending content-focused professional learning community meetings within the school. These formal leaders were indicated as a direct link for support of most assistant principals. Formal leaders in these positions who are content specialists typically have sufficient time to devote directly to content-focused instruction (Smith et al., 2017). Multiple stakeholders with strong content knowledge can enhance the instructional capacity of the school (Klar, 2012).

The building principal was also perceived as a formal instructional leader. Participants viewed their principal as a mentor figure who encourages professional readings around instruction, values instruction and designates time for assistant principals to be involved in the instructional aspect of their job, encourages leaders to enhance the content knowledge of the subjects they supervise, provides autonomy for the assistant principal as they supervise various departments, and pairs the assistant principal with at least one content area with which they are familiar. The literature review also suggested principal support related to content-focused instructional leadership where principals' actions of allowing the assistant principal to grow professionally in their position was relevant.

Distributed instructional leadership was a key takeaway for the assistant principals in this study. Informal and formal leaders are valued for their content expertise and commitment to support assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. Higgins and Bonne (2011) suggested combined efforts where many are at work together have a bigger influence on instruction compared to a single individual having to go it alone. Shatzer et al. (2014) argued that

content-focused instructional leadership takes a commitment to display change within a given supervised content area.

Connection of Research and Findings of Self-Efficacy of Instructional Leadership

Because academic achievement in schools is at the forefront of educational reform, an assistant principal's sense of self-efficacy is critical in their role as an instructional leader, especially related to supervising content (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). An assistant principal's ability to become an effective content-focused instructional leader depends on their personal value of worth (Timperley, 2005). Ultimately, the belief one has of whether they are efficacious is directly related to how they perceive and commit themselves to being a content-focused instructional leader (Zheng et al., 2019). Assistant principals in this study had varying perceptions of self-efficacy depending on various factors to be discussed further in the next section.

Self-Confidence of Being a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

One main point participants acknowledged documented their increased self-efficacy, or self-confidence, in supervision of content areas previously taught. Their content background and familiarity of the subject increased their confidence in these areas. Others suggested their confidence came from a personal passion or interest in supervising subjects with a limited background due to a personal connection and comfort level with these areas. A few participants mentioned no decrease in confidence supervising areas where their initial background was different from the subject area. Their confidence level was connected to supporting teachers with general teaching practices and leaning on the support of content experts to help fill any gaps related to content. These participants suggested seeking informal and formal leaders for support to enhance school leaders' self-efficacy around content-focused instructional leadership. Recall

from previous discussion that self-efficacy is the belief someone has about their own ability to accomplish a task (Bandura, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The way a person plans, organizes, and executes courses of action influences their level of self-efficacy (Bandura & Schunk, 1981).

Gannouni and Ramboarison-Lalao (2018) suggested self-efficacy is a person's self-perception related to determining their self-confidence to achieve certain goals. Participants shared ways to support their ability to be an effective instructional leader, including taking time to build positive relationships with teachers in order to gain their trust, being accessible and approachable, fostering collaboration among teachers, offering ongoing support and encouragement, valuing the dedication and hard work of teachers, and being open to grow professionally alongside them. When assistant principals find they can overcome obstacles that hinder their self-efficacy, they can produce desired results based on their actions (e.g., Benight & Bandura, 2004). Conversely, when someone is unable to make a difference, they might have little incentive to act as a support in the face of difficulties or challenges (Benight & Bandura, 2004). This could influence instructional leaders when they are faced with anxiety or discomfort related to supervising unfamiliar subject areas—research that is consistent with findings suggested by participants in the study.

Self-confidence comes down to leaders taking time to self-reflect and believe they can effectively supervise content at the high school level (Koonce et al., 2019). Many participants in this study acknowledged wanting to build relationships with teachers in order to work alongside them in a professional manner. This is consistent with research from Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004), who suggested leaders' self-confidence increased when they became connected to those they led. When supported, participants suggested an increase in their self-confidence

related to their position as content-focused instructional leaders. Most participants recommended increased focus on content knowledge preparation for assistant principals in administrative preparation programs and at the district level once in the position. When supports are in place there is a direct connection to increased self-efficacy.

Higher self-efficacy levels, even in the midst of challenges, are witnessed when individuals are motivated and provided the support necessary to enhance their self-confidence (Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Schunk, 2016). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) suggested increased levels of support and persistence toward the accomplishment of a goal increases the potential to work through setbacks when they occur. Ultimately, when assistant principals possess confidence, support, and guidance, their ability to supervise content-focused instruction will increase (McCormick, 2001). It is important for school leaders to feel internal confidence that they can meet the challenges of their position (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Self-efficacy is imperative for content-focused to build leadership capacity. Schools should also establish ways to support the leader so they can, in turn, support the professional growth of the teachers they supervise, regardless of the content. There are several ways schools can support assistant principals' self-confidence.

Aids to Support Self-Confidence as a Content-Focused Instructional Leader

Two main subthemes emerged when speaking with participants about the supports necessary to enhance their self-efficacy (i.e., self-confidence) related to being a content-focused instructional leader. The first subtheme was specific content-focused instructional support. Ideas related to this subtheme include a desire for professional development focused on content knowledge. Participants wanted guidance to enhance their ability to work with teachers based on their limited knowledge when supervising unfamiliar subjects at the high school level. The

second subtheme was consideration of time allotment and how to better address time management. Assistant principals shared struggles of finding time to focus on instruction. Because many roles and responsibilities are associated with the assistant principal position at the high school level, a structure and balance of these two subthemes would increase self-confidence of leaders in this position.

Professional Development Related to Content-Focused Instructional Leadership. Participants shared their limited knowledge around how to be the most effective content-focused leader possible for their teachers. Unfortunately, content-focused instructional leadership practices are impeded when a leader lacks knowledge in a particular content area (Shaked et al., 2019). Lochmiller and Karnopp (2016) suggest filling these gaps or weaknesses is critical for these leaders to formally address the complex tasks associated with this position. There is a direct alignment of the literature and the findings; they both identify the need for increased support for high school assistant principals. Because leadership capacity increases in such a position, there is a need for guidance and direction as assistant principals take an active role in instructional improvement (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). The idea is to provide assistance where necessary to develop assistant principals who are competent when supervising instruction where they have a limited knowledge base.

One main idea participants addressed involved collaboration with credible knowledge holders at the district level who could support them. Participants suggested that experts could provide content-focused professional development sessions for assistant principals. Targeted professional development for instructional leaders is much the same for teachers, where specific weaknesses around content can be addressed using differentiation and identification of areas in need of support (Barnett et al., 2017; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). These opportunities would

prepare assistant principals for their role of instructional supervision of various content areas (Barnett et al., 2017). Additionally, assistant principals suggested having ongoing meetings with district-level content experts throughout each school year and recommended listening to the assistant principals to learn what type of professional development they deem beneficial to enhance their content-focused instructional leadership. Continuous engagement through professional development sessions with content-focused instructional leaders could enhance leadership development and support teacher professional growth and overall student achievement (Koonce et al., 2019).

Time Allotment Focused on Instruction. The second subtheme in the findings identified revisiting the many roles and responsibilities of the position and determining how to refocus time on instruction. Participants shared that they needed time to focus on the instructional aspects of their position. Unfortunately, the myriad duties associated with the assistant principal position are not prioritized (Mercer, 2016). Participants' lack of time focused on instruction was a constant challenge. Hausman et al. (2002) suggested the complexity of the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader in times of school reform requires further attention, hence listening to the perspectives of participants in this study.

Participants needed time in their schedule for training centered around evaluation and feedback to be able to best support their teachers around instruction. They wanted more time to work directly with teachers focused on content-specific evaluation and feedback. Both of these suggestions are tools that could directly improve instruction and support the professional growth of teachers. Unfortunately, the reality of what assistant principals are expected to do typically impedes the chance to work with teachers on instruction (Cranston et al., 2004; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Participants also wanted time to work directly with colleagues to receive

feedback and support from one another. They were unsure if feedback they provided to teachers was actually supporting their professional growth based on having minimal preparation in the area of evaluation and feedback. Participants revealed wanted to become more involved as content-focused instructional leaders with their teachers. They felt that time to talk with peers would valuable, yet their non-instructional responsibilities pulled them in so many other directions this opportunity seldom happened. Participants suggested being able to work collaboratively with other administrators during the observation and feedback process would be beneficial. This finding is consistent with Armstrong (2015), who suggested instructional leaders who work with other administrators who are readily accessible can establish a trusting, positive, supporting relationship. Ultimately, needing more time to focus on becoming a competent content-focused instructional leader was a consensus identified from the study.

Relationship of Findings Related to Previous Studies

The findings of the study revealed connections to previous studies mentioned in the literature review. Muñoz and Barber (2011) found there was an attraction to supervision of instruction rather than the other roles and responsibilities associated with the assistant principal position. Participants, when they had prior background experience of content knowledge or passion for a particular subject, experienced increased self-efficacy supervising that content area. This finding is also consistent with two previous studies that revealed a majority of time spent on non-instructional duties as well as minimal focus on professional development and time allocated toward an instructional leadership focus (see Cranston et al., 2004; Hausman et al., 2002). Consistent with previous research, participants in this study reported that time constraints took away from instructional leadership aspects of the position and more time was needed for content related professional development.

Many participants in the study revealed a disconnect between preparation and the reality of the position. This aligns with findings from Armstrong (2015), who suggested assistant principals feel uncertain being middle managers between teachers and upper-level administration. Similar to Armstrong (2015), participants in my study felt success or failure of the position relied on their self-confidence and whether they felt isolated and inadequate or supported and effective as instructional leaders. Participants were satisfied when they could lead the teaching and learning process as effective instructional leaders, similar to Shore and Walshaw's (2018) findings. Listening to the voices of assistant principals provided valuable insight about what supports are necessary for their success as content-focused instructional leaders (Armstrong, 2015).

Implications for Assistant Principals as Content-Focused Instructional Leaders

The findings imply instructional leadership and self-efficacy impact assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. Because a plethora of instructional and non-instructional responsibilities are associated with the position, consideration of how best to support assistant principals at the high school level who supervise multiple content areas is crucial. Unfortunately, the literature review revealed minimal research associated with the assistant principal position. Participants in the study shared many connections including specific supports necessary for assistant principals to become effective content-focused instructional leaders. Although there is shared responsibility of supervision of instruction at the high school level, lack of content knowledge in a supervised area could hinder being an effective content-focused instructional leader (Searby et al., 2017).

Supporting content knowledge and effective instructional leadership practices is pivotal for success of the assistant principal as an instructional leader (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). Searby et

al. (2017) argued effective leaders need continuous support through diverse opportunities to become competent with instruction. Leaders can counteract challenges and become resilient with assistance and support from those with content expertise (Quong & Walker, 2010). When supports are in place, the potential to improve as a content-focused instructional leader becomes an opportunity for professional growth. Consequently, participants in this study sought additional resources and support. Much change is necessary if assistant principals at the high school level are to be effective content-focused instructional leaders when they lack confidence and content knowledge of the subjects they supervise.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study reveals assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders at the high school level need additional support and preparation before and during their tenure of the position. Administrative preparation programs should fuse together with content fields based on the direction an aspiring leader wishes to consider. Content knowledge development was considered during the study as well as the idea of preparing aspiring administrators with the tools they need to be effective evaluators who provide feedback. Leadership preparation programs should equip aspiring leaders with the tools and resources they need to have meaningful discourse with teachers and provide with them content-focused feedback for their professional growth. Additionally, when school districts hire for the assistant principal position, they should consider previous teaching experience and content knowledge background should be considered.

School districts should also provide professional growth opportunities to support their assistant principals. Participants shared their lack of confidence due to the minimal amount of feedback they received about their role as an instructional leader. The principal plays a critical role to support the assistant principal's professional growth as an instructional leader. Schools

should integrate ongoing feedback to the assistant principal regarding their role and effectiveness as an instructional leader at the high school level; this is imperative if they are to support teacher professional growth in areas where they lack confidence. Although assistant principals can assist in supervising content areas through feedback about general teaching practices, lack of content knowledge can hinder the progress and development of classroom teachers. Continuous support will ultimately provide opportunities for assistant principals to enhance teaching and learning at the high school level.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although many aspects of the assistant principal as a content-focused instructional leader were considered, future research in this area is essential to support those in the position. The current study only included 16 assistant principals across three regions of Virginia. Consideration of the perspectives of additional assistant principals, perhaps in regions not captured in this study but also in other states, would add to the body of knowledge around content-focused instructional leaders. Additionally, no high school teachers were interviewed in the current study. Perspectives of teachers, including their thoughts of supervision by those with and without content backgrounds of the subject areas would also add to the body of knowledge around content-focused instructional leadership.

Furthermore, future research should include perspectives of college and university administrative preparation programs and how they recognize, or not, their influence on producing content-focused instructional leaders. Ideas shared by participants within the current study and their impact on assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders is a final avenue for future research. If the supports suggested by participants in the current study as well as revelations in the literature were in existence, hearing the perspectives of assistant principals

who experience those supports would enhance the limited amount of knowledge around this topic. Many ideas captured from the current study provide insight about ways to enhance the position of assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. The job of future researchers is to take these ideas, put them into action, and look for ways to enhance the instructional leadership qualities of high school assistant principals who supervise content.

Concluding Remarks

The study revealed assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders in the high school setting need further attention to support their efforts. Participants in the study suggested limited content knowledge around many of the subjects they supervised; implementing identified supports could improve the performance of high school assistant principals as content-focused instructional leaders. Many respondents were somewhat reluctant when speaking about their lack of content knowledge when supervising areas of which they were not highly qualified. Hassenpflug (2013) argued instructional leaders need confidence rather than having to apologize or display resistance based on their lack of content knowledge within a specific subject area. This study suggests a need for support for assistant principals as leaders of content to positively influence high school teaching and learning.

As an insider—I am currently an assistant principal who supervises a high school mathematics department—this study allowed me to personally take on researcher positionality. I am without a highly qualified status in this area according to the VDOE. The open and honest feedback gathered during each of the 16 interviews indicated participants felt safe and trusted during the process. Ultimately, I was interested to find out whether information collected for the literature review and revealed during the interviews was common to my personal experience as a content-focused instructional leader. Many of the findings revealed similar characteristics.

Overall, there were three major findings generated from the study. These three findings indicate the balance of roles and responsibilities of the position closely designating structured time and attention toward content-focused instructional leadership; representation of supports necessary to overcome challenges when in the position of being a content-focused instructional leader, particularly one who has limited background knowledge of certain content areas; and, finally, ways to consider building self-efficacy of instructional leaders so they can become competent in the content areas they supervise. The grounded theory developed from the current study reveals a distinct connection to the supports necessary to complement assistant principals as influential instructional leaders. Hence, the emerging grounded theory originating from this study is 'The Theory of Enhancing the Capacity of Assistant Principals as Content-Focused Instructional Leaders.' Supervision of content has the potential to affect teacher professional growth and positively influence overall student learning. In the end, it all comes down to support provided for assistant principals to increase not only the instructional aspects of their position, but also enhance their self-efficacy to be competent leaders for the teachers they supervise.

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Appendix A

Assistant Principal Interview Request Letter (Email)

Dear (participant's name):

My name is Mary Hardesty. I am a doctoral candidate at Old Dominion University in the process of conducting a study of assistant principals as instructional leaders at the high school level. You have been identified as high school assistant principal serving in this capacity and are in an ideal position to help expand research of the position.

This study will provide significant insight of assistant principals as they navigate their position as both a managerial and an instructional leader. The findings of this study will ideally inform effective strategies and supports that may be useful to assistant principals in their efforts as content focused instructional leaders.

You have been identified as a potential participant because you meet the criteria of being an assistant principal who is an instructional leader at the high school level who supervises one or more content areas. I am requesting your participation in my study. Your participation will involve a 45 - 60-minute virtual interview at a time that is convenient for you between March 1, 2021 – April 30, 2021.

All assistant principals participating in this study will remain anonymous. Please be assured the interview will be completely confidential. No names will be attached to any notes or records from the interview. All information will remain in locked, password protected files accessible only to the researcher and the dissertation chair. No employer, supervisor, or district will have access to the interview information. Your participation would be greatly valued.

If you have any questions you may reach me via telephone at 540-810-1096 or by email at mhard004@odu.edu. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Mary Hardesty

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B

Informed Consent Letter

Information About: Assistant Principals as Instructional Leaders in the High School Setting
Responsible Investigator: Mary Hardesty

Purpose of Study. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Mary Hardesty, a doctoral student from Old Dominion University, under the advising of dissertation chair, Dr. Karen Sanzo, Professor of Educational Leadership at Old Dominion University. The purpose of this study will provide significant insight of assistant principals as they navigate their position as both a managerial and an instructional leader. The findings of this study will ideally inform effective strategies and supports that may be useful to assistant principals in their efforts as content focused instructional leaders.

Why is this research being done? This study aims to capture the implications of assistant principals as they supervise instruction at the high school level based on whether they are highly qualified in the content area they supervise. The objective is to discover leadership practices and strategies assistant principals can utilize to support their instructional capacity in reference to supervision of a specified content area as well as ways to increase their self-efficacy within the position.

Who are potential participants? Potential participants will include assistant principals at the high school level who supervise a particular content area.

What is expected of the participants? Participants who choose to take part in the study will be asked to sign an informed consent document. Assistant principal participants will then complete an interview with researcher Mary Hardesty. Interviews will be audio recorded with participant consent. The audio recording can be paused or discontinued at any time by the participant without penalty. The researcher may also end the interview at any time without ramifications. Any artifacts and transcripts gathered by the researcher will be kept strictly confidential and in a locked location only accessible to the researcher and dissertation chair.

How much time is required from the participant? Individual interviews will take approximately 45 – 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interview transcript will be sent to the participant for review and anything the participant feels is in error or should be omitted, will be addressed by the researcher. The audio recordings and transcripts will be kept in a secured electronic file on a password protected computer, accessible to only the researcher and dissertation chair for review of the conversation for validity of the responses. All electronic audio files and transcriptions will be destroyed no longer than three years after the research is completed.

Where will the interviews and observations take place? To ensure the safety of participants, interviews will take place virtually due to Covid-19.

What benefit can the participants consider? Participants will not be compensated for their contribution but will agree to participate on a voluntary basis. Participants may feel rewarded knowing their contribution will add to the field of research on assistant principals as content focused instructional leaders.

How will the participants' confidentiality be protected? The researcher will keep all recorded interviews and artifacts in a locked location only accessible to the researcher and dissertation chair. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants except for the signed consent form to be kept secure by the researcher and then destroyed no longer than three years after the research study is completed.

What risks can the participant expect? There is minimal to no risk of physical, psychological, social, or financial risk to participate in this research. By participating in this study, I agree to complete an interview with researcher, Mary Hardesty. The interview will take approximately 45 – 60 minutes and will be scheduled at a location agreeable to me. Completion of the interview will occur between March 1, 2021 and April 30, 2021.

I understand that:

1. There are minimal risks associated with the research. I understand the researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping my interview transcript and recording in a password protected location accessible only to the researcher and dissertation chair.
2. A potential benefit of this study will include my contribution of knowledge through lived experiences of my position as a content focused instructional leader. The findings of the study will be available to me at the conclusion of the study. I will not be compensated for my participation. I willingly participate on a voluntary basis. At any time I wish to discontinue my participation in the research, I can do so; however, I will need to contact Mary Hardesty to alert her of my discontinued participation.
3. If I have any questions or concerns, I can contact Mary Hardesty, researcher, at mhard004@odu.edu or by cell phone at 540-810-1096, the dissertation chair, Dr. Karen Sanzo at ksanzo@odu.edu or by phone at 757-683-6698, or Dr. Laura Chezan, IRB Chair, DCEPS, at lchezan@odu.edu or by phone at 757-683-7055.

   I have read the above and understand it, and I hereby consent to the procedures set forth.

_____ Printed Name of Participant & Role

_____ Signature of Participant & Date

Appendix C

Interview Questions

What is your educational background to include previous teaching and administrative experience? What institution did you complete your administrative preparation program?

What content do you currently supervise as an instructional leader and are you highly qualified in the content area?

What are your additional roles and responsibilities in your current position beyond those of instructional leadership?

How would you define the term content focused instructional leadership in regard to supervision over your specific content area(s)?

What would you identify as personal strengths of being an instructional leader over the content area you supervise?

How and in what ways do your strengths support your effectiveness as an instructional leader?

What would you identify as personal challenges of being an instructional leader over the content you supervise?

How and in what ways do you request support of challenging areas to improve your practice as an instructional leader?

How and in what ways do you facilitate efforts to increase your content knowledge of the subject you supervise?

What type of support does the school district offer, if any, as professional growth opportunities for assistant principals for content knowledge development?

How and in what ways does your building principal support your leadership development in regard to instruction?

How in and what ways do you share instructional leadership capacity of the content you supervise with informal and formal leaders inside and outside of your building?

What is your level of confidence in regard to supervising instruction over a specific content area?

What are your personal values and beliefs of an effective content focused instructional leader?

What would you suggest in your position would aid your performance in order to increase your personal self-confidence as a content focused instructional leader?

VITA

MARY FRANCES HARDESTY

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Mary Frances Hardesty is an Assistant Principal of Instruction in Newport News, Virginia. Her research interests include instructional leadership and influences to support novice and current educational leaders.

Education

Doctor of Philosophy: Educational Leadership, August 2021.
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia

Educational Specialist: Educational Leadership, December 2017
Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia

Master of Education: Curriculum and Instruction, May 2007
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia

Bachelor of Science: Family and Consumer Science, August 2002
Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, Virginia