

## **I'm Ready to Lead: A Case Study on The Experiences Gained from A Job-Embedded Principal Residency Program**

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### **Abstract**

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*This qualitative single case study examines the experiences gained from a job embedded principal preparation residency program. The job-embedded principal internship is a rich, authentic learning experience with a just-in-time curriculum, including hands-on instructional coaching opportunities throughout the 15-month residency program. The study's purpose was to reflect on ways to improve principal preparation programs to impact school outcomes, including building human capital in their school districts. The study's significance will contribute to the refinement of current principal preparation programs and suggest today's assistant principal's roles and responsibilities impact student outcomes and build human capital within a school district.*

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**Keywords:** principal preparation, job-embedded, school leadership, rural school

## **1. Introduction**

Recently there has been an interest in principal preparation programs that provide authentic experiences equipping future leaders with the decisive capacity to succeed. This reflective study examines the perceptions of a leader that participated in a job residency program or a grow your leader (GYOL) program. The study intends to evaluate the impact the authentic learning experiences had on the participants as they stepped into a leader's campus position. The job-embedded, GYOL program this participant experienced prepares future leaders by building partnerships between Texas Tech University and school districts. It is a yearlong, intensive program that allows future leaders to experience leadership and learning theory nuances while also having a mentor and a university coach. The participants conduct an equity audit, coach two lower performing teachers, and follow students enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) and special education throughout the entire year of the residency.

In a current podcast provided by the Wallace Foundation, the speaker converses in the processes of building principal pipelines to substantially enhance the quality of aspiring principals into the principal pool to improve schools (Wallace Foundation, 2018). The sub-title of the podcast "invest in your best," sums it up by describing future school district leaders and aspiring leaders within their school district to contribute to the pipeline of growing your leaders. In this study, the grow your leader GYOL approach is the foundation through which the researchers reflected on the participant's lens that completed a 15- month job-embedded principal preparation residency program.

This study reflected on a 15-month job-embedded principal preparation residency program with an intense concentration on preparing aspiring leaders for the instructional leadership role. An additional focus for this program was building human capital from selecting principal candidates to improve teacher development. This residency preparation program provided opportunities for leading learning through five specific areas. These included: (1) use of equity audits, (2) coaching skills, (3) leadership through teams, (4) student advocacy, and (5) data-driven decision-making. As part of this principal preparation process, principal interns had to agree to leave their current teaching campus' and move to another campus within their respective districts to serve as principal interns. The interns utilized equity audits as foundational work to become familiar with their new campuses exposing inequities for students, staff, and programs throughout the campus (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). This work gave interns an accurate picture of the campus and a starting point for school improvement conversations and planning. The second focus of this program was to grow interns as instructional coaches. Focusing on teacher development in this specific rural school where in general has an increasing number of teachers with an alternative certification route, supporting teachers in their first year of teaching is essential (Brenner, D., Elder, A., Wimbish, S., & Walker S., 2015). This work also utilized data from the initial equity audit to select teachers in need of growth. An equity audit is a tool for school leaders to identify factors in teacher quality, programs, and student achievement that appear to reveal inequities (Skrla et al. 2004). Furthermore, an equity audit is a way to highlight disparities that lead to achievement and opportunity gaps.

Interns each coached a minimum of two teachers for the school year using a university created coaching framework. Additionally, interns were scored on a university created rubric on their coaching skills and competencies. This was accomplished by videotaping the interns as they coached their two teachers during four cycles of preconferences, observations, and post-conferences (POP cycles). Interns were also expected to select one team or professional learning community (PLC) team to act as a participant-leader. Again, data from the equity audit guided interns to the grades and content areas in most need of assistance. Interns participated in these teams throughout the school year, providing relevant data for instructional discussions. Principal interns were provided an opportunity to advocate for high-risk students. Each intern used the most current student data to select one student identified as an English Language Learner (ELL) and one student protected under the special education umbrella. This work included meeting with teachers serving these students to discuss teaching strategies and required education plans, attending campus meetings for these students, and monitoring their growth through data-analysis of scores from formative and summative assessments. Lastly, principal interns created a plan for improvement that encompassed the areas mentioned above for teacher growth, PLC growth, and growth for two students. This was done by writing quarterly SMART goals (smart, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound), action steps for each area and quarter, expected growth by quarters and end of-year goals, and monitoring each area. This study examined a principal intern's perceptions who completed this rigorous, contextual-based residency program on the current roles and responsibilities as they served in an official assistant principal position.

This study examined the perceptions of one former principal candidate who completed the residency program in the context of her current position serving as an assistant principal. The purpose of the study was two-fold. The first intent was to compare the job-embedded residency program experiences to the real-world experiences serving as an assistant principal. The primary reflection engaged in with the participant was intended to understand her perceptions of whether the learning opportunities provided in the residency program were aligned to the actual work of an assistant principal. The second purpose of the study was to genuinely reflect on ways to refine the principal preparation program to produce high-quality school leaders who can impact school improvement in their school districts.

The significance of this study is also two-fold. First, this study will provide a foundation for comparisons to other research and literature related to principal preparation programs to understand the opportunities for alignment to assistant principals' current roles. Secondly, this study will contribute to the refinement of current principal preparation programs by providing authentic reflections on learning experiences that impacted school improvement. The following two research questions with one clarifying question were used to guide this study:

RQ1: In what ways did the job-embedded principal preparation residency program prepare the 1st year assistant principal the following year?

RQ2: In what ways can the principal preparation program improve the curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction based on the perceptions of the principal intern who completed the job-embedded residency program?

## **2. Literature Review**

This section contains a presentation of literature that examines the roles of the assistant principals, along with the transformation of principal preparation programs as they grow. The literature also highlights instructional leadership components and the impact coaching has on building human capital and student success. The literature review includes peer-reviewed journals, articles, and policy briefs that articulate past roles of assistant principals, how aspiring principals are trained, and the concept of instructional leadership for principals. Lastly, the review describes in detail the work done by embedded principal interns during the 15-month program.

### **2.1 Assistant Principal Role**

Describing the assistant principal's role has changed over time; therefore, the preparation required for these leaders has morphed into an authentic, real experience driven training such as those provided by GYOL's. The roles of assistant principals tend to maintain discipline, including classroom behavior as the first line of support (Calabrese, 1991). Glanz (1994) explored the concepts of redefining the role and responsibilities of the assistant principal and suggested that relieving them from prior duties such as discipline would allow more opportunities to assist teachers in the classroom, enable assistant principals to engage more intellectually, and that "academic and social objectives would have a greater chance of being achieved because more time would be allotted for instructional improvement" (p. 286). The role and responsibilities of assistant principals continue to expand as the needs of the campuses change. In this era, assistant principals focused on creating a learning environment that supported all students achieving higher (Kaplan & Owings, 1999). Literature suggests assistant principals serve as mentors to teachers, teacher evaluators, designers for master schedules, staff development planning, and resource persons (Kaplan & Owings, 1999; Weller & Weller, 2002; Bartholomew, Melendez-Dalaney, Orta, & White (2005).

The roles and responsibilities of an assistant principal continue to get refined to start targeting instructional leadership specifically. Bartholomew et al. (2005) stated that "in some districts, such as those in New York City, high school assistant principals specialize in subject areas so that they can provide instructional support and professional development" (p. 23). Hartley (2009) further noted that the assistant principal is an integral part of the accountability system and their contribution to support instruction and student achievement is vital.

### **2.2 Preparation Programs**

Recent literature reports school districts are taking initiatives to build human capital within their system by training standing assistant principals within their districts. Maryland established summer retreats for their assistant principals and their mentor principal to engage in high-quality training for effective leadership (Mitchell, 2015). Illinois revamped how school leaders prepare by emphasizing the need for principals to serve as instructional leaders. Since then, the state has incorporated yearlong aspiring principal programs that work in close partnership with universities to prepare the client (i.e., the aspiring principal). In 2016, the Illinois Education Research Council and the University

of Chicago Consortium and School Research reported that the principal candidates showed promising results from the revamped pre-service training emphasizing on the pre-kindergarten level to English language learners to special education students (Mitchell, 2015). The 15-month job-embedded principal preparation residency program or GYOL utilized for this study is the current training mechanism that allows the participant to have relevant, supported experiences that further their actions and knowledge in a setting of support and coaching.

This study's foundation was supported by a theoretical framework of shared leadership and the importance of solidifying and developing human capital. Lambert (2002) stated it best: "the days of the principal as the lone instructional leader is over" (p. 37). So, it shall be to establish the growth of human capital within school districts substantially. In developing strong leaders committed to the practice, and their real experiences are the cornerstone of development. Lambert (2002) suggests that for leadership capacity to occur, "learning and leadership should become fused into professional practice" (p. 37). In this study, the participant (i.e., principal intern) fused her learning from the job-embedded principal preparation residency program into real, contextually based practices on her campus, serving as an assistant principal.

This framework also helps establish personal reflection among the university faculty members in rich dialogue on improving the principal preparation program by emphasizing instructional leadership's importance. Lambert (2002) specified that one component of building leadership capacity is reflective practice; whereas, reflective practice is the lens the researchers and the participants of this study used to focus on the continual improvement of the curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction of the principal preparation program further to enhance the growth of human capital in school districts. The key to developing strong leaders and human capital in a district is tied to future leaders' preparation. This reflective study provides insight into the rich, authentic experiences of the participant. Throughout this study, GYOL, Grow Your Own Leader, and the principal preparation program is used interchangeably. Human capital refers to the individuals who are part of a campus and maintain a commitment to it.

### **3. Methodology**

This study utilized the model of qualitative research through the lens of a single reflective phenomenological design (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This model was conducted due to a focus on a phenomenon from one candidate who participated in a job embedded principal preparation residency program. "Qualitative research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation" (Merriam, 1998, p. 15). The purpose of the methodology was for the researchers to develop a deeper understanding through reflective questions about the residency program's experiences on how the experiences were applied the following year as the participants served as an assistant principal.

This study focused on one principal intern who participated in a cohort of the 15-month job-embedded residency program. The principal interns in this cohort were vetted through a school-university and a non-profit organization partnership. The partnership included five public school districts, 14 different campuses, including elementary, middle, and high schools ranging from rural to suburban to urban communities throughout Texas. From the cohort, one individual now serving as an assistant principal was selected for the study.

Purposeful sampling was used to select one participant for this study. Before such sampling, selection criteria must be established (Merriam, 1998). This study purposely examined one principal intern's perceptions who completed all the 15-month program requirements and who was currently serving as an assistant principal the year immediately following the job-embedded principal preparation residency program experience. The principal intern completed the residency program in a rural elementary public school in Texas. This purposeful, typical case sampling technique provided the researchers with an information-rich perspective gained from participating in a reasonably new (i.e., the second year) job-embedded principal preparation residency program (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2017).

#### **3.1 Data Sources and Analysis**

The data collected through this qualitative study were conducted through an interview. The participant was invited to participate in an interview, not to exceed 30 minutes. After the participant accepted the invitation to participate in the study, the participant was interviewed employing a virtual, face-to-face setting. The interview format utilized semi-structured questions allowing for the participant to elaborate on any question provided (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2017). The interview was recorded and transcribed for the researcher to analyze emergent themes.

The interview provided detailed responses for all questions asked. The rich narrative was analyzed through the NVivo qualitative software. Nodes were created based on emerging themes, and sub-nodes or categories were also identified for each node. Four main themes emerged: (1) intentional placement of residency, (2) shifting the mindset of discipline, (3) the power of self-reflection, and (4) instilled confidence drives initiative. The sub-nodes included tasks performed during the residency program and were identified as valuable tools during the interview.

## **4. Emergent Themes**

### **4.1 Current Role of Participant**

During the first year serving as an assistant principal, the participant identified three main areas that were assigned roles for the job. The first duty was an overarching managerial piece that included creating duty maps for teachers. The assistant principal was charged with focusing on the crisis prevention plan and ensuring school safety was prioritized. The assistant principal looked for all the possible blind spots on campus and made sure teachers were supervising these areas. The second primary duty assigned was the discipline piece. The students were divided by alphabet and assigned to the two assistant principals. The third primary role assigned was instructional leadership. Here, the assistant principal conducted walk-throughs of teachers, collaboratively planned with a team of teachers in TLT (teacher leadership team), administered LPAC (language proficiency assessment committee) meetings, and administered ARD (admission, review, and dismissal) meetings in the absence of the principal. The following question was asked to elicit reflection on intern work alignment to work as a current assistant principal. Four main themes emerged from this question.

RQ1: In what ways did the job-embedded principal preparation residency program prepare the 1st year assistant principals the following year?

### **4.2 Intentional placement of residency**

The first theme that emerged was the intentional placement of residency. For participation in the program, districts agreed to place principal interns on a new campus from the one currently serving before the residency program. The campus-level (high school, middle school, or elementary) did not have to be the same. The purpose of the newly assigned campus was for candidates to experience a school year's full operation from preparation for school start, experience with hiring, testing season, contract renewals, budgeting, and planning, to closing campus for the summer. Additionally, this placement allowed interns to develop new working relationships with campus personnel, students and families, and community members as an integral piece of their leadership experience. This study participant was placed on an elementary campus during the residency program and was hired as an assistant principal at the high school the following year. The participant emphasized that the elementary campus staff was more heartfelt than the high school campus staff and wanted to bring that element to the high school. The experiences serving at the elementary level were heavy on instructional leadership rather than discipline. Serving on the elementary campus, her instructional leadership experiences guided her in her instructional leadership practices once she transitioned to the high school level. During the residency program, the intern identified using the TAIS (Texas Accountability Intervention System) plan to guide her. The resident intern focused on two teachers on the TAIS plan by creating strategic interventions on best teaching practices and actively monitoring each of these interventions. While monitoring interventions was ongoing, the intern used quarterly goals, interventions, and data to proceed from quarter to quarter. The specific best practice intervention was focusing on small group instruction with students. A difference she noticed at the high school level was that while high school teachers planned strategically, the teachers tended to use larger class sizes as "barriers instead of their classrooms' attributes." In her role as a first-year assistant principal, she had to change the mindsets of teachers so that small group instruction could be applied as it was at the elementary level. The participant's intentional placement in an elementary campus allowed the intern to experience the administrator role in two unique settings (elementary as an intern; high school as an assistant principal). These two administrative lenses are now part of her toolbox for leading learning.

### **4.3 Shifting the mindset of discipline**

The second theme provided different lenses to how the assistant principal administered discipline at the elementary and high school levels. The resident intern experience at the elementary level focused on re-directing students when it came to discipline. While this was not the norm at high school, she attempted to infuse this same concept. "Everybody deserves a clean slate every day whether - it's not even every day it could be even every period as a

student walks out the door and walks back in after redirection,” she exclaimed. Not only did she bring this new concept of re-direction, but she also ensured “the equitability of providing students with the basic needs of emotional and social part.” During the residency program, her university faculty coach provided feedback on having the resident intern reflect on every student’s story and think about him or her individually before deciding on discipline. The intern was able to take learning from the residency at the elementary level and transform it to fit high school students' needs.

#### **4.4 Self-Reflection**

The third theme that emerged was self-reflection. As noted above, the faculty coach’s feedback throughout the residency program opened the eyes of self-reflection from the resident intern. The assistant principal explained how she changed how she handled discipline at the high school level from her elementary level experiences. The major eye-opener that guided self-reflection was mirrored on videos of her preconference and post-conference experiences. As a resident intern, she was required to support two struggling teachers throughout the school year by conducting four preconference, observation, and post-conference (POP) cycles. During the pre and post conferences, the intern recorded them so that the university faculty coach could provide feedback and for the intern to assess herself. “I noticed how teachers react, and I hadn’t seen that when I was in the actual meeting with the teacher,” she stated. She also picked up other verbal signs such as “um huh, um huh, um huh” indicators informing her that the teacher had checked out. Lastly, the reflection time allowed her to focus on what is genuinely needed for students to be successful rather than merely identifying a refinement and reinforcement area for the teachers with no connection to student learning.

#### **4.5 Instilled confidence drives the initiative**

The fourth emergent theme was the intern’s confidence. Throughout the interview, the participant used the words “confidence” and “I” statements implying that the residency program had boosted her self-confidence and consequently allowed her to take the initiative and support students. The pre and post-conference videos contributed to building confidence. By watching the videos, “I had to own it by seeing it, and I solved it.” During her residency program, she also felt prepared to talk to any parent when they came to the office and wanted to speak. Another role she took the initiative on was instructional leadership. Her current role as an assistant principal was mainly managerial, so she asked her principal if she could improve student achievement. From this meeting, she led more team meetings with teachers on student achievement. Her experience from the residency program and her master teacher experience before the residency program helped “provide them with support on the evaluation system on how to score evaluations.” She also took the initiative to help the other assistant principal create growth plans and positively use them to grow teachers. This new confidence level allowed the intern to be an assistant principal to ask for more responsibility related to instructional leadership.

RQ2: In what ways can the principal preparation program improve the curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction based on the perceptions of the principal interns who completed the job-embedded residency program?

### **5. Limitations of the residency program**

The participant provided several ways in which the preparation program prepared her for the 1st year serving as an assistant principal. The participant mentioned that learning management skills were lacking. The majority of the residency program was focused on instructional leadership. Another skill lacking was the experience of dealing with student discipline issues. The participant also believed that role modeling would have helped her in the school's day-to-day operations. Overall, she emphasized she felt prepared and confident on all levels moving from embedded intern to a full-time assistant principal position.

### **6. Discussion**

A discussion of this study's implications was guided by the research questions and emerging themes described above. The third research question below has allowed for debate and expanded view of university work through a professional development lens to support current school administrators.

RQ3 - In what ways can the principal preparation program provide school districts training for current assistant principals who did not complete a rigorous, job embedded residency program with a concentration on instructional leadership?

The participant stated that the pre and post-conference videoing was useful in preparing her to be an instructional leader. She found it helpful to self-reflect on the videos and to internalize the feedback from the university coach. The participant added that conducting an equity audit, a residency program task, was an opportunity to find blind spots. The equity audit allowed her to dig deep into the data and find actionable trends.

The second implication of the study is the importance of the job-embedded residency program. The residency program instilled confidence in the participant to take the initiative to focus on the lives of students. She provided the same rich opportunities the residency program provided her, such as conducting POP cycles, quarterly monitoring through TAIS, self-reflecting on videos, and valuing each student individually before making discipline decisions. By nurturing each student individually, discipline is not just maintained (Calabrese, 1991), but instead creating learning environments for all students' achievement (Kaplan & Owings, 1999). Furthermore, there is a strong implication that confidence drove an initiative for spending more time on instructional leadership pieces (Glanz, 1994) and that assistant principals need to push the status quo beyond their assigned duties, such as the managerial pieces. As the study participant so succinctly stated,

“You have to put yourself out there and want to be a coach, an instructional coach. Because you can get very comfortable in a principal assistant position with the management pieces because those are the easy pieces. Those are the pieces that really don't hurt others, they're simple, maybe a duty map, maybe standing out at lunch duty, you know the management pieces, yes, you're ensuring student safety, but are we pushing it even further and getting student achievement.”

The following are the next steps for university and district partnerships to strengthen principal preparation program experiences and professional development for current school administrators.

### ***7. Implications and Recommendations for School Leaders***

There are several implications posed for administrators serving in a secondary level administrative level. The first implication is that this particular intern's opportunities in the job-embedded program can be replicated in an already established principal position. In other words, a principal that is already certified and serves as in an assistant or principal role, can develop the same knowledge and skill set, such as growing teachers throughout the school year. It is recommended that all principals and assistant principals conduct an equity audit before their school year. This will allow them to understand any inequities or confidential data they may not know when the school year starts. Conducting an equity audit will provide a blueprint of where the campus is and where the campus needs to improve, as highlighted in this study. Second, there is a strong recommendation that the next step is to set-up a well-developed action plan, as described above. The TAIS instrument is used in Texas and is used for improvement in required schools. However, any action plan can be set-up to address the campus's needs as long as it contains practical components that an action plan should have to produce results. It is recommended that the action plan have the following elements: root cause analysis with stakeholders of the problem of practice identified from the equity audit, S.M.A.R.T. annual and quarterly goals, interventions, and most importantly, how the interventions will be progress monitored. This study has revealed that the intern conducted all these components described above with two teachers, one professional learning community, one SPED student, and one ELL student. The intern proved that by conducting an equity audit, developing and implementing an action plan, progress monitoring the action plan's interventions, and effectively conducting POP cycles does improve teacher practices and school outcomes.

Another implication from the study is that any principal can take the initiative to improve school outcomes. Whether they have the confidence to take the initiative is the question. It is recommended that the more experience the assistant principal and principal have of conducting effective POP cycles with teachers, then their confidence will increase to work with struggling teachers. It is recommended that assistant principals and principals use the evaluation tool such as T-TESS effectively to improve teaching practices. The principals need to fully understand the rubric being used and align the justification of the rating with evidence; this includes providing mastery level evidence for each indicator. As described in this study, the T-TESS rubrics, Pre and Post-conference rubrics, and sufficient feedback/justification of observation ratings were done objectively limited bias and subjectivity from the principal.

### ***8. Conclusion***

Three main work areas were identified as “next steps” for the principal preparation program's continued improvement. First, the university faculty responsible for curriculum development of the principal preparation

program and district partners will continue focus group sessions through face-to-face and virtual platforms. The purpose of these sessions will be to review areas of strength and weakness of the principal preparation program, processes and procedures for candidate selection, intern placement, and mentor selection. Second, university and district partners will aggressively pursue state and federal grant monies to support initiatives such as professional development for current administrators and full-time embedded principal intern residencies where possible. Lastly, university faculty will continue to seek out best practices for principal preparation programs by developing university partnerships to grow school administrators for diverse schools and settings.

This study has provided a rich, in-depth look at one principal intern experience through the lens of a job-embedded residency program. The participant's experience is one of fourteen participants similar to the same job-embedded principal preparation residency program. The experiences gained from the job-embedded residency program instilled confidence to drive initiative, shift the mindset of how to address discipline issues, and for the principal intern to self-reflect throughout the internship and assistant principal journey to make thoughtful decisions that ultimately is in the best interest of all students.

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