

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF FIELD EXPERIENCES ON CANDIDATES' COMPETENCE  
AND CONFIDENCE IN AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAM

By

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Capstone

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## Executive Summary

Tulip Tree University's<sup>1</sup> Instructional Leadership Program prepares aspiring principals and assistant principals to become instructional leaders in Tennessee's PreK-12 schools. Candidates in the program participate in field experiences every semester which allow them to practice their leadership skills and address real challenges in the schools where they currently work. This capstone project explores the degree to which candidates in the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters felt that practicum projects prepared them for future instructional leadership opportunities. Specifically, this project drew from Experiential Learning Theory to learn more about participants' perceived development according to the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS) and participants' perceived confidence in their leadership abilities because of their participation in field experiences.

This project used semi-structured, open-ended interviews and observations of participants' practicum project presentations to answer the following questions:

1. How do practicum courses at Tulip Tree University help instructional leadership candidates apply their learning from core classes to leadership challenges in the field?
2. How do instructional leadership candidates perceive that field experiences support their development according to state-defined instructional leadership competencies (TILS)?
3. How confident are instructional leadership candidates that they will be able to apply instructional leadership competencies to future settings and scenarios?

Through this project, I found that practicum projects in the Instructional Leadership Program effectively helped participants to practice some indicators in the TILS *and* positively influenced participants' confidence in their capabilities as future instructional leaders. However, participants did not practice all TILS indicators through practicum projects: projects addressed

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<sup>1</sup> Tulip Tree University is a pseudonym.

multiple indicators in Standard A: Instructional Leadership for Continuous Improvement and only one indicator in Standard C: Professional Learning and Growth.

Participants' perceptions about their own leadership development were personal and varied. Participants shared varying beliefs about the purpose of instructional leadership and reflected differently on the process of becoming a leader. Participants most often discussed their development as leaders who impact student and teacher outcomes and less often discussed their development as leaders who influence school culture or ensure compliance with district initiatives. Additionally, my findings suggest that participants may be missing opportunities to engage with some abilities in the experiential learning cycle like abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, which could affect their long-term learning.

Based on these findings, I recommend that Tulip Tree University require that instructional leadership candidates practice indicators from multiple TILS in each practicum project (with special considerations for Standard C) and encourage candidates to reflect on the various purposes of instructional leadership and their experiences with the process of becoming a leader during practicum project presentations. Such changes to the practicum projects' existing guidelines and scoring rubric will promote practice with more TILS indicators and support candidates to engage with each ability in the experiential learning cycle.

## Introduction

In February 2020, the Tennessee Department of Education released the Best for All strategic plan, outlining the state's approach to improving academic outcomes and student success in Tennessee's schools (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). Best for All interventions aim to improve the state's math and reading performance on national assessments and increase the likelihood that students will meet key benchmarks by graduation (Aldrich, 2019; Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). As part of this plan, the Tennessee Department of Education named an intention to support aspiring teachers and leaders by emphasizing field experiences throughout the state's educator and leader preparation programs (2020). Field experiences provide early-career educators and leaders the chance to practice and refine their content knowledge and skills using on-the-ground learning opportunities in PreK-12 settings (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017, p. 11). The Best for All strategic plan argues that quality field experiences effectively prepare educators for the demands of teaching and leading in PreK-12 schools, which will in turn impact student achievement and outcomes statewide (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020, p. 13).

Effective leader preparation plays an important role in building educator and school capacity. Research suggests that principals have the second-highest effect on student learning after classroom instruction and having a high-quality leader at the helm can significantly improve outcomes in underperforming schools (Leithwood et al., 2004). Because instructional leadership is so closely related to student success, it is important to understand how to prepare and retain effective school leaders. A recent survey from the National Center for Education Statistics found that 18% of principals leave their positions annually to seek employment in other districts as well as in other roles or industries (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Public schools in

Tennessee experience school leader turnover at a similar rate (Grissom, Bartanen, & Mitani, 2019, p. 12). Therefore, leadership preparation programs in Tennessee must prepare aspiring principal and assistant principal candidates to meet the needs of school communities *and* sustain this work over time. To this end, high-quality field experiences can be a valuable way for aspiring principals and assistant principals to gain experience, grow confidence, and build relationships before they take on the responsibilities of leading schools on their own.

In Tennessee, leadership preparation programs also help prospective principals and assistant principals develop the leadership competencies represented in the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b). According to the Tennessee State Board of Education, an “ethical and effective” school leader is one who employs practices that support school culture, engage stakeholders, promote professional learning, and pursue continuous improvement (2018b, p. 1). The state’s approved university-based instructional leadership preparation programs focus on cultivating these leadership competencies throughout core classes and field experiences so that candidates are positioned to apply them to future leadership opportunities in Tennessee’s schools (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018a).

Tulip Tree University<sup>2</sup> is a state-board approved leader preparation program in Tennessee. The university’s Instructional Leadership Program has long valued field experiences and uses them extensively to complement the program’s core coursework. The Instructional Leadership Program prepares current Tennessee educators for future school leadership opportunities using personalized, site-specific practicum experiences that take place in the schools where instructional leadership candidates already work. Each semester, Tulip Tree University’s instructional leadership candidates design and customize their practicum experiences to suit the

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<sup>2</sup> Tulip Tree University is a pseudonym.

needs of their respective schools. These practicum experiences allow aspiring principals and assistant principals to apply classroom learning to relevant and meaningful school leadership challenges. Such personalization, however, means that instructional leadership candidates may develop state-defined leadership competencies at different rates and to different degrees depending on the nature of the field experiences with which they engage. Candidates may also find that site-dependent practicum experiences prepare them to lead in particular settings and under particular circumstances but leave candidates feeling unprepared to implement leadership competencies in other ways. The purpose of my capstone project is to explore the degree to which candidates at Tulip Tree University believe that practicum courses prepare them for the work of future instructional leadership, focusing on how candidates perceive that field experiences support them in developing leadership competencies that they can confidently transfer and apply to new challenges.

### **Organizational Context**

Tulip Tree University serves undergraduate and graduate students in Tennessee. Tulip Tree University's graduate program gives students the opportunity to pursue advanced degrees including a Master of Education (M.Ed.). Candidates in the M.Ed. program are experienced PreK-12 classroom teachers who learn to manage instruction, achievement, and change in schools before making the transition into school leadership positions. Importantly, the Master of Education's Instructional Leadership Program qualifies as a state-approved instructional leader preparation program. Tennessee educators must complete a state-approved program as part of the process to obtain an Instructional Leadership License, which is required to serve as a principal or assistant principal in most school districts (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). As one of

only a few such programs in the state, Tulip Tree University provides an essential service for PreK-12 educators preparing to lead schools.

The Instructional Leadership Program offers experienced teachers access to the professional learning experiences necessary to serve in PreK-12 administration and aligns with Tennessee's Learning Centered Leadership Policy (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018a). Upon admission to Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program, candidates pursue one of two courses of study: (1) a full M.Ed. course sequence leading to an advanced degree that includes the Instructional Leadership endorsement or (2) an abbreviated course sequence to add the Instructional Leadership endorsement to an existing master's degree. Classes in the program use in-person, weekend learning experiences to accommodate the needs of candidates working full-time in PreK-12 schools. Each class is designed to address particular Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS) and is paired with a self-directed practicum experience in which candidates apply their learning to the unique contexts in which they work. In this way, the Instructional Leadership Program provides a course of study that closely overlaps with the challenges that leadership candidates face in their own schools.

Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program impacts the work of a number of individuals and communities in Tennessee. Primarily, the program directly affects the professional learning of instructional leadership candidates. Tulip Tree University has active mentorship agreements with several Tennessee counties and program participants from these counties vary from year to year. Instructional leadership candidates serve as teachers or administrators for a wide range of content across primary and secondary settings in Tennessee. While candidates enter the program with a deep knowledge of their school sites as practitioners, practicum experiences allow candidates to build deeper relationships with professional site

mentors and influence student achievement by working with teachers and teams across their sites. Consequently, field experiences equip candidates with opportunities to make an immediate difference in their schools and develop leadership competencies that they can later use to influence the achievement of students and teachers across a variety of PreK-12 settings.

Ideally, practicum experiences allow aspiring leadership candidates to apply their learning in core classes to authentic challenges in the field *and* support candidates in developing the leadership competencies and confidence to be effective leaders in the future. To this end, my project explores the extent to which candidates in Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program feel that field experiences prepare them for the work of future instructional leadership by answering three questions. First, how do practicum courses help instructional leadership candidates apply their learning from core classes to leadership challenges in the field? Second, how do candidates perceive that field experiences support their development according to the TILS? Finally, how confident are candidates that they will be able to apply instructional competencies to future settings and scenarios? This study hopes to inform the design of Tulip Tree University's practicum experiences such that instructional leadership candidates feel highly prepared to apply their learning and improve student outcomes upon graduation.

### **Problem of Practice Description**

Practicum experiences are an essential component of state board approved leadership preparation programs and bridge the gap between theory and practice by allowing candidates to apply their learnings to school-based activities with guidance from professional site mentors and university staff. Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program places a heavy emphasis on field experiences for all candidates, regardless of whether the candidate pursues the full Master of Education program or seeks to add the Instructional Leadership endorsement to an



existing advanced degree. Practicum courses are intentionally designed to meet the needs of each candidate's school, and candidates participating in field experiences work with their own professional mentors (often current principals, assistant principals, or other instructional leaders) to identify practicum project topics that serve the site where they currently work. The candidate then develops the project, monitors and measures the project's implementation, and shares the results of the project in a formal defense at the end of each term.

Importantly, practicum courses allow aspiring school leaders to develop their competencies as instructional leaders in alignment with the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards, or TILS (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b). The TILS guide leadership development and administrator evaluation in Tennessee by setting high standards for Tennessee's instructional leaders and promoting leader actions that positively impact student achievement. To do so, the TILS provide a set of "core performance indicators of ethical and effective instructional leaders" (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, p. 1). The TILS organize these core performance indicators according to four overarching standards which together define the role of ethical and effective instructional leaders. Table 1 describes these standards and outlines their connection to ethical and effective instructional leadership behaviors.

Table 1: Ethical and Effective Instructional Leaders in Tennessee (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, pp. 1-2)

<b>Purpose of the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS)</b>			
<p>“Effective instructional leaders ensure that school personnel, programs, procedures, and practices focus on the learning and achievement of all students. The Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS) identify core performance indicators of ethical and effective instructional leaders. Tennessee seeks to transform what it means to be an effective instructional leader at all phases of a leader’s career by setting high standards for effective leadership based upon research and best practice, supporting leaders to reach those standards, and empowering districts to build a network of exceptional instructional leaders who get results.”</p>			
<b>Standards and Descriptions</b>			
<b>Standard A:</b> Instructional Leadership for Continuous Improvement	<b>Standard B:</b> Culture for Teaching and Learning	<b>Standard C:</b> Professional Learning and Growth	<b>Standard D:</b> Resource Management
<p>“An ethical and effective instructional leader facilitates professional practice that continually improves each student’s learning.”</p>	<p>“An ethical and effective instructional leader collaborates with stakeholders to create and sustain an inclusive, respectful, and safe environment providing equitable educational opportunities and culturally responsive practices conducive to learning and growth for each student.”</p>	<p>“An ethical and effective instructional leader develops [the] capacity of each educator by designing, facilitating, and participating in collaborative learning informed by multiple sources of data.”</p>	<p>“An ethical and effective instructional leader facilitates the development of a highly effective learning community through processes that enlist diverse stakeholders and resources.”</p>

Each standard includes indicators which outline the specific competencies associated with ethical and effective instructional leadership. These indicators operationalize the TILS and provide the means by which instructional leadership can be observed, measured, and evaluated. Because mastery of the TILS is key to the success of future school leaders, Tulip Tree University

wishes to know more about the extent to which candidates feel that field experiences support them in developing and applying leadership competencies according to the TILS.

While candidates design their practicum projects according to the expected learning outcomes outlined in the *Tulip Tree University Instructional Leadership Program Practicum Handbook*, the open-ended nature of personalized and context-dependent learning experiences means that opportunities to demonstrate the performance competencies outlined in the TILS are likely to vary across each site. Accordingly, candidates in the program may practice and develop some competencies more often or more thoroughly than others. This variation might occur both *within* and *across* TILS. For example, a candidate at one site might have multiple opportunities to support culturally responsive practices in alignment with Standard B while another candidate might have more opportunities to lead professional learning opportunities in alignment with Standard C. Additionally, candidates are likely to develop their confidence in exercising these standards at different rates and to different degrees.

While comprehensive and meaningful practicum experiences are critical for all aspiring leadership candidates, these practicum experiences may be especially important for leadership candidates in Tennessee's rural school districts. Rural districts often include only a handful of schools. This relatively low number of sites means that fewer opportunities exist for aspiring leadership candidates to apply for vacant principalships or assistant principalships in the counties in which they already live and work. In a perfect world, Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program's practicum experiences would equip students with the experience, confidence, and professional networks needed so that when these opportunities become available, graduates are seen as the top choice to assume formal school leadership roles in their districts. Additionally, on-site practicum partnerships offer local principals and assistant

principals a direct line of sight into the quality of Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program: if current school leaders observe dramatic changes in leadership competencies and confidence across their mentees, they may be more invested in sustaining their partnerships with the university and more likely to recommend the program to aspiring leaders on their staff.

### **Literature Review**

To examine the outcomes of Tulip Tree University's instructional leadership practicum experiences, we first must consider the role that field experiences play in instructional leadership preparation programs broadly. In the following literature review, I examine the characteristics of effective instructional leadership preparation programs and explore field experiences that successfully prepare aspiring school leaders for future job tasks. This review demonstrates that the strongest field experiences use hands-on learning opportunities to help aspiring instructional leaders link theory and practice, grow and refine leadership competencies in new environments, and develop confidence in their ability to lead schools. In doing so, this section emphasizes the importance of field experiences in preparing prospective principals and assistant principals to improve outcomes in Tennessee's PreK-12 schools. Establishing a common understanding of how field experiences grow instructional leaders' skills and confidence is central to addressing the problem of practice, as this process brings to light the features of field experiences that are likely to support and expedite leadership growth regardless of context-specific variation at practicum sites.

Since this project focuses specifically on an instructional leadership preparation program in Tennessee, I define terms to align with those used by the Tennessee State Board of Education and the Tennessee Department of Education. I define "instructional leaders" as people who hold

formal PreK-12 school leadership positions for which the Tennessee Instructional Leadership license is required. This term generally pertains to principals and assistant principals, though some instructional leadership candidates represented in this literature review may support a school's leadership team as instructional coaches, academic deans, etc. The term "instructional leadership" refers to the practices that school-level administrators use to manage school improvement and boost student achievement (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018a, pp. 6 - 7). Relatedly, "instructional leadership preparation program" means a state-board approved course of study that serves as a prerequisite for educators who hope to obtain a Tennessee Instructional Leadership license. Finally, it is necessary to define "leadership competencies" using state-specific terms. Learning activities in Tennessee's instructional leadership preparation programs adhere to Tennessee's Instructional Leadership Standards; therefore, "leadership competencies" means the actions and behaviors outlined in the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018a and 2018b).

The following literature review proceeds in two stages. First, this review surfaces common traits of instructional leadership preparation programs and highlights the characteristics of programs that both researchers and leadership candidates find to be highly effective. Once this is established, this review then narrows its focus to take a closer look at the ways in which instructional leadership preparation programs leverage field experiences in particular. The second section of the literature review seeks to understand how and when field experiences prove to be most valuable to aspiring leadership candidates. I use the findings from the literature review to inform the selection of the conceptual framework and, later, the manner in which data are collected for this study.

## **Instructional Leadership Preparation Programs**

Many states require educators to complete instructional leadership preparation programs before becoming eligible to serve as principals or assistant principals in PreK-12 schools (Education Commission of the States, 2018). Graduates of university-based instructional leadership programs who currently serve as principals and assistant principals generally agree that their programs adequately prepared them with the skills and knowledge needed for the work of school leadership (Johnson, 2016, p. 25). Some studies pay particular attention to “exemplary” university-based programs that produce instructional leadership candidates who feel highly prepared for the demands of the job (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Studies suggest that exemplary leadership preparation programs have features in common including knowledgeable faculty, a close alignment to professional standards, an intentional focus on school improvement and change management, and learning activities that allow candidates to apply and reflect on leadership practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Mitgang, 2012; Orr, 2010).

Exemplary leadership preparation programs also help aspiring principals and assistant principals develop the confidence needed to pursue and persist in school leadership positions. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) found that graduates from exemplary university-based programs demonstrate more effective leadership practices *and* report feeling better prepared for the work of future principalships (p. 33). Candidates’ perception of their own preparation matters, since candidates who feel more confident about their abilities to serve as school leaders are more likely to pursue opportunities to lead when they become available (Winter, Rinehart, & Muñoz, 2002). Based on these findings, we can conclude that the most effective instructional leadership preparation programs not only equip aspiring principals and assistant principals with the

knowledge and skills to lead schools, but also help candidates believe in their ability to address leadership challenges as they arise.

### **Field Experiences**

Many instructional leadership preparation programs nationwide use field experiences<sup>3</sup> to support candidates' learning (Education Commission of the States, 2021). Graduates of instructional leadership programs across several studies speak to the value of field experiences in enhancing theories and practices introduced in core coursework (Chandler, Chan, & Jiang, 2013; Fowler & Cowden, 2015; Jiang et al., 2009). Instructional leadership candidates reported that high-value field experiences offered opportunities for hands-on learning, aligned with real challenges in candidates' schools, and resembled the actual work of principals (Chandler et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2009). Field experiences also positively influence candidates' confidence in their ability to lead. One study by Jean and Evans (1995) found that first-year principals who completed field experiences reported feeling significantly more prepared for the work of their new positions. When done correctly, field experiences can provide an important venue for aspiring instructional leaders to practice leadership skills through hands-on learning and gain confidence in their ability to perform the tasks needed to effect change in schools.

Field experiences are also unique in that they offer aspiring principals and assistant principals access to dynamic learning opportunities unlike those found in traditional classroom settings. Notably, field experiences allow leadership candidates to apply their learning to real problems of practice in ways that can lead to tangible change for the site (Pounder, 1995). Field experiences also give leadership candidates the chance to learn alongside professional site

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<sup>3</sup> Studies in this review use terms like "practicum experiences," "internships," or "job-embedded learning" to refer to hands-on formal learning experiences that take place in PreK-12 settings. In the interest of clarity, this review uses the term "field experiences" when discussing site-based learning opportunities. This term aligns with language used in the Tennessee State Board of Education's Learning Centered Leadership Policy (2018a).

mentors. One study of university-based practicum courses found that candidates and site mentors both agreed that the most meaningful activities were those facilitated through hands-on learning activities that mirrored the actual activities principals perform in their work (Jiang et al., 2009). Such findings suggest that field experiences are not only beneficial to the learning of instructional leadership candidates but hold value for field sites' stakeholders as well.

Overall, instructional leadership preparation programs play an important role in developing candidates' leadership competencies and confidence required to lead change in PreK-12 schools. Quality field experiences are key in this pursuit and help candidates apply their learning to relevant problems, observe the impact of their work in the field, and feel confident in their ability to transfer leadership competencies to future settings. These findings are important to bear in mind as I explore how Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership candidates perceive that participation in field experiences influences their growth as competent, confident instructional leaders. Next, we turn our attention to the learning processes that enable field experiences to strengthen and refine candidates' leadership competencies. The following section builds upon the literature by introducing a conceptual framework that addresses the area of inquiry and influences the design of this capstone project.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) explains how field experiences facilitate and reinforce adult learning. Experiential Learning Theory draws on the work of theorists Lewin, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky and describes a continuous process through which learning is derived from and modified by the experiences of the learner (Kolb, 2014, ch. 2). In Experiential Learning Theory, theorist David Kolb argues that all learners enter situations with an idea of how to respond to the challenges presented to them. Learners' pre-existing knowledge is shaped into

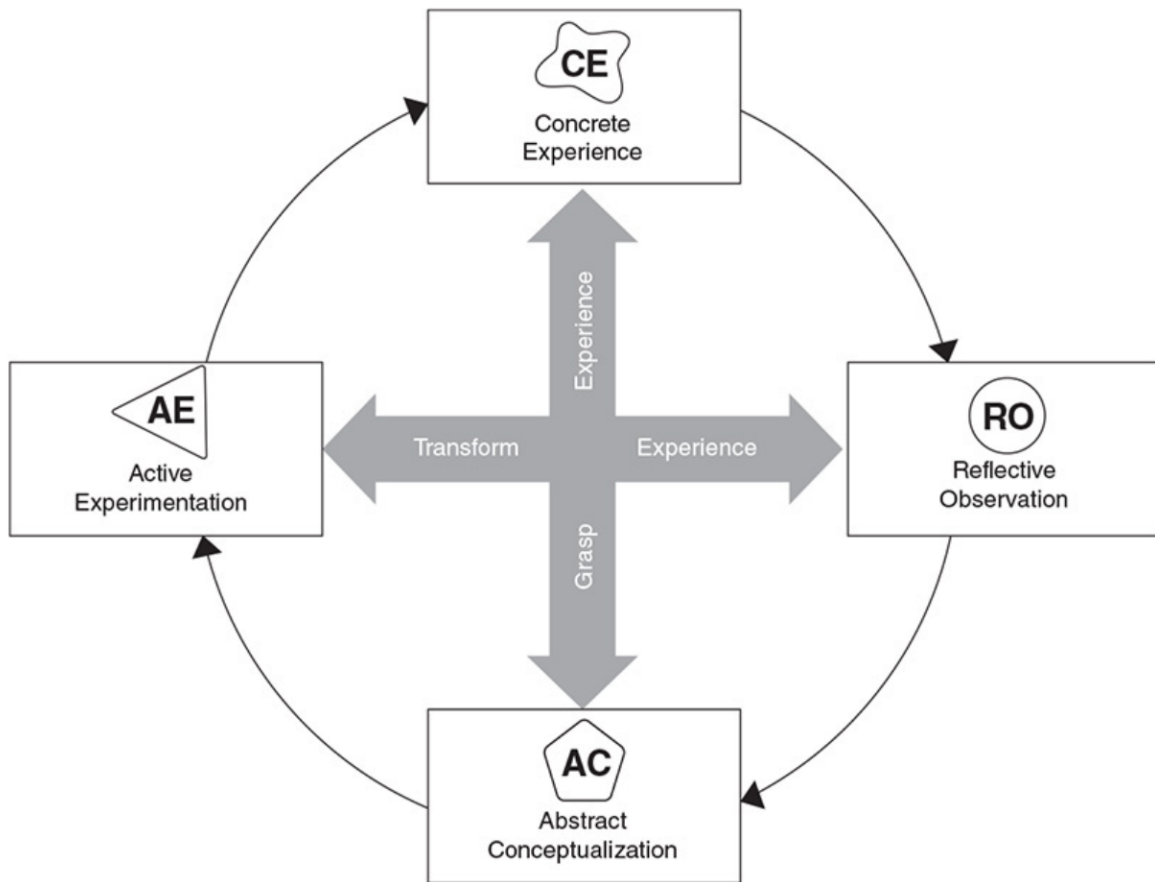


new knowledge through a process called the experiential learning cycle. The experiential learning cycle (depicted in Figure 1) describes how learners experience events, think about their experience, and alter their behaviors and mindsets based on individual reflection. According to Kolb (2014), the experiential learning cycle engages learners with four learning abilities:

- Concrete Experience (CE) involves the learner in personal experiences.
- Reflective Observation (RO) allows the learner to reflect on their experiences.
- Abstract Conceptualization (AC) helps the learner integrate previously held ideas or theories with observations generated through the learner's reflective observation.
- Active Experimentation (AE) assists learners in applying new, revised ideas to future experiences.

Kolb (2014) notes that the experiential learning cycle uses learners' perceptions of immediate and personal ("concrete") experiences as the starting point and focus for learning activities. The cycle itself, then, is a recursive process through which learners' knowledge continuously transforms because of feedback from the environment and input from the learner themselves.

Figure 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle from Kolb (2014, ch. 2)



Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes that learning occurs through the application and transformation of knowledge within learners' responses to personal experiences. Field experiences in instructional leadership preparation programs offer a clear example of ELT at work. In their design, field experiences bridge the gap between theory (i.e., ideas the learner encounters in a university classroom) and practice (i.e., experiences the learner engages with at a field site). Field experiences provide hands-on opportunities for aspiring principals and assistant principals to test out what they have learned in formal coursework, strengthen their leadership competencies by participating in leadership activities, and gain confidence in their abilities to lead future change in the real world. In this way, field experiences grant instructional leadership

candidates the chance to practice each ability in the experiential learning cycle. First, concrete experiences (CE) provide learners with the space to apply initial learning from core coursework to relevant challenges at individual sites. Next, learning is transformed through learners' reflective observation (RO) about the effectiveness of their present leadership activities, abstract conceptualization (RC) that redefines learners' existing approach to leadership activities, and active experimentation (AE) through which learners improve their ability to lead by changing their mindsets and behaviors. Participation in the experiential learning cycle yields lasting differences in how leaders might transfer desired leadership competencies to future scenarios.

In addition to its relevance to individual learning experiences in the field, Experiential Learning Theory is also an appropriate conceptual framework to use in understanding how adult development occurs in a broader social context. Field experiences allow for instructional leadership candidates to practice and internalize their learning through interaction with others at their field site. This learning-through-interaction is consistent with the principles of ELT, which considers development to be a transactional experience shared between the individual and the environment (Kolb, 2014, ch. 6). Kolb (2014) also posits that learning takes place at the intersection of personal and social knowledge, and therefore learning serves as a social process in addition to an individual experience (ch. 6). Field experiences in instructional leadership preparation programs are inherently social learning opportunities, since these experiences afford candidates the chance to engage with a community's stakeholders in ways which are not available in traditional classroom settings. Such social interaction provides feedback for aspiring principals and assistant principals as they build and transform their leadership competencies, and positive social feedback may help boost candidates' confidence in their potential to lead instructional activities in new settings.

## **Project Questions**

This review demonstrates the importance of effective instructional leadership preparation programs in preparing principals and assistant principals to effect change in PreK-12 schools. Field experiences play a critical role in helping aspiring leaders to build leadership competencies and grow confidence in their ability to enact these competencies in future challenges. To understand how Tulip Tree University's field experiences prepare instructional leadership candidates for the future work of school leadership in Tennessee, we must explore how these field experiences help candidates to apply, reflect on, and transform their learning. To do so, this project considers three guiding questions:

1. How do practicum courses<sup>4</sup> at Tulip Tree University help instructional leadership candidates apply their learning from core classes to leadership challenges in the field?
2. How do instructional leadership candidates perceive that field experiences support their development according to state-defined instructional leadership competencies (TILS)?
3. How confident are instructional leadership candidates that they will be able to apply instructional leadership competencies to future settings and scenarios?

## **Project Design**

### **Data Collection**

This qualitative study collected data on each of the three project questions using both semi-structured, open-ended interviews with instructional leadership candidates and observations of participants' formal practicum project presentations at the end of each semester. Interviews granted insight into instructional leadership candidates' experiences in practicum courses and took place throughout the 2021-2022 academic year to capture how participants perceived that

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<sup>4</sup> While I use the term "field experience" to describe site-based learning opportunities in the literature review, I use the term "practicum experience" in this writing when discussing Tulip Tree University's program in particular. This term is consistent with the language used in Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program.

their leadership competence and confidence grew over time. I recorded and transcribed interviews with participants and coded them to reveal emergent themes across instructional leadership candidates' experiences and across time. This study also used recorded, transcribed, and coded observations of participants' practicum project presentations to triangulate these themes.

The unique characteristics of Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program informed the tools and methodology for this study. I designed the study's data collection approach with the program's population in mind and considered candidates' potentially limited time to participate in activities related to the study. Instructional leadership candidates pursue their graduate coursework in addition to serving as full-time teachers and leaders in Tennessee's PreK-12 schools. Consequently, this study used research strategies to encourage participation within candidates' schedules. These strategies included designing interview protocols that required no more than 45 minutes of participants' time and scheduling observations during formal presentations that were already required of instructional leadership candidates.

I recruited participants for this study from Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program. To recruit participants, I attended the first practicum course of Fall 2021 to introduce the project and invite interested candidates to participate. The program's director shared a list of prospective participants' email addresses with me and I sent prospective participants an email inviting them to participate in a semi-structured interview three weeks in advance of the first interview window. The email contained brief information about the project, a link to the participant consent form, and a link to a Google Form which prospective participants used to confirm their interest and availability. (See Appendix A.) Two weeks before the first

interview, I sent a second invitation email to prospective participants who did not respond to the first email.

Five participants responded to the email to confirm their involvement. These participants reviewed and signed a participant consent form and granted their permission for interviews to be audio recorded. Participants then selected a 45-minute interview time slot and indicated their preferred interview format: phone call, Zoom meeting, or face-to-face interview. At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to confirm that they understood the participant consent form and asked their permission to audio record their interviews. These protocols remained in place before the first, second, and third round interviews throughout the year: participants confirmed their consent and agreed to be audio recorded before each interview began. In addition to granting consent to be interviewed, participants gave permission for their practicum project presentations to be observed and audio recorded for the purposes of the study in the second and third rounds of data collection as well. These observations took place at the end of the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters.

Data collection occurred during three windows throughout the 2021-2022 academic year. (See Appendix B.) Participants in the study completed one interview during each window. The first interview occurred midway through the Fall 2021 semester, the second interview occurred at the end of Fall 2021, and the third interview occurred at the end of Spring 2022. I scheduled interviews throughout the academic year to capture participants' evolving engagement with practicum projects over time. Two interviews occurred simultaneously with candidates' practicum project presentations near the end of the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 terms. This allowed candidates to share responses that encapsulated their learning experiences within each

semester-long practicum project. Practicum project presentation observations took place during the second and third data collection windows and aligned with the end of the semester.

This study's conceptual framework informed each stage of data collection. Participants reflected on their personal learning experiences through individual, in-depth interviews, and the results of those interviews revealed how each participant engaged with the experiential learning cycle during their practicum experiences. Accordingly, the study's interview protocol included prompts that aligned with the project questions and with the Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization abilities represented in the Experiential Learning Cycle. (See Appendix C.) Additionally, practicum project presentations required instructional leadership candidates to reflect on the design, results, and impact of their practicum projects in order to share their learning in the field. Observations of these projects yielded additional data about participants' Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization abilities and granted insight into the ways in which participants understood the outcomes of their practicum projects.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Generating Themes and Creating Codes***

I recorded interviews or observations with all participants after they granted their consent to be interviewed or observed and audio recorded. I then uploaded and transcribed these recordings using Otter.ai software. During this process, I assigned participants a pseudonym so that data collected across interviews and observations could be linked to the same instructional leadership experience while protecting participants' confidentiality. I moved the transcripts to a secure Box folder owned by Vanderbilt University and de-identified participants by redacting identifying details about the participants and their field sites.

With the transcripts secured, I used inductive, open coding to identify themes across qualitative data. I used open coding to generate a codebook based on the interview responses collected during the first round of data collection in October and November 2021. This codebook included a description of each code, an example of each code from participants' interviews, the date on which the code was introduced, and an abbreviation used to mark instances of the code in transcripts. I revised the codebook during subsequent rounds of open coding. Sometimes these revisions involved refining the definition of an existing code or introducing a new code. If I needed to introduce a new code or revise an existing code, I returned to previously reviewed transcripts to update the analysis accordingly. I continued to update the codebook while applying open coding to transcripts of interviews and observations throughout the year and I tracked which codes appeared in which candidate's transcripts over the course of the project.

Through this open coding process, I identified seven broad themes and 33 discrete codes in participants' transcripts. Themes and codes addressed each of the three project questions and revealed more about how participants applied learning from core classes to their practicum projects, how participants practiced TILS competencies in their practicum projects, and how confident participants were that they would be able to apply these competencies to future instructional leadership challenge. These themes included:

- Participants' connections to class material. Participants made connections to class material by relating the TILS to a component of their practicum project or by reflecting on how something they had learned in class at Tulip Tree University had informed their practicum experience. Participants' connections could be *strong*, *moderate*, or *weak* depending on the accuracy and depth of their connection to the TILS.



- Participants' mention of their previous experiences as a teacher or leader. Participants sometimes made sense of leadership challenges by referring to their previous experiences as a *teacher in the classroom* or as a *leader in a school*.
- Participants' description of their relationship with their mentoring principal. Participants described *positive, neutral, or negative* relationships with the administrators who worked with them during their practicum projects.
- Participants' reflections on relationships with teachers. Participants who reflected on relationships with teachers mentioned how a relationship was *changing*, described the role of *credibility* or *trust* in working with teachers, described or anticipated taking on teacher *management responsibilities*, or described the *potential negative social impact* of conducting their practicum projects.
- Participants' reflection on the purpose of instructional leadership. Throughout the project, participants described the purpose of instructional leadership as exercising *best practices*, maintaining *compliance*, supporting *family and community engagement*, ensuring *equity*, *managing leaders* towards success, supporting *school culture*, seeking *school improvement*, changing *student outcomes*, examining *systems*, or changing *teacher outcomes*.
- Participants' reflections on the process of becoming a leader. Participants who reflected on the process of becoming a leader did so by discussing how they *gained confidence*, *changed their behavior*, *experienced difficulty*, *experienced or overcame fear*, *practiced influence*, *increased knowledge*, *built or managed relationships*, or reflected on leadership in general.

- Participants' reflections on their future as a principal. Throughout this capstone project, participants discussed their future as a principal with *confidence* or with *hesitance*.

Once I identified these themes and codes, I then examined changes over time by comparing participants' responses across interviews from rounds one, two, and three and observations from rounds two and three. I created findings and recommendations based on patterns in the data which directly aligned with the project questions. These findings centered on four of the seven themes: connections to class material, purpose of instructional leadership, process of becoming a leader, and future as a principal. Table 2 depicts the codes, descriptions, and examples associated with each of these themes. The full codebook is available in Appendix D.

Table 2: Qualitative Analysis Codebook (Excerpted)

Theme	Code	Description	Example
Connections to Class Material	Class Connection - Strong	Candidate discusses how the practicum project relates to content in a TILS-aligned class <i>or</i> Candidate discusses how the practicum project helps them practice the TILS introduced in class.	“(The project) went hand-in-hand with the work I’m doing in the assessment course right now...” “I had to collaborate with the teachers... to communicate what we’re going to do (in the project). That’s TILS indicator one, I think. We had the goal of changing (a system in our school)....”
	Class Connection - Moderate	Candidate tries to discuss the practicum project using the language or content introduced in class but sometimes hesitates or is unclear.	“Can you read me the first (standard)? I think it’s, like, communicating with stakeholders, maybe?”
	Class Connection - Weak	Candidate has difficulty identifying a connection between the practicum project and class content or cannot describe how their practicum project relates to class.	“I don’t know the exact standards off the top of my head... I have to go back into the Canvas and the syllabus for the course in order to answer that.”
Purpose of Instructional Leadership	Best Practices	Candidate refers to an instructional leader’s role in following “best practices” (based on research, experience, or anecdote).	“I wish there... was something that they involved [us in] where we got to go out, and they knew, ‘Okay, this school is the best school in the... area... We’re gonna want you to go there for... a couple of days a semester or something like that just to... observe their principals and ask questions.”
	Compliance	Candidate refers to an instructional leader’s role in maintaining compliance.	“The district purchased this and said, ‘You will use it.’ And so, I know that as a principal, sometimes your hands are tied.”
	Family & Community Engagement	Candidate refers to an instructional leader’s role in supporting community engagement.	“My practicum mission... will... encourage more parental involvement at our school.”
	Equity	Candidate refers to the role of instructional leaders in ensuring equity.	“I want to make sure that I’m doing the best as a leader to set an example... and that we set standards and we are inclusive and promoting, you know, different cultures and things like that... that we’re including everyone.”
	Leader Outcomes	Candidate refers to the role of instructional leaders in managing other leaders toward success.	“I delegated... this... to [a leader, who...] delegated through [their] department.”
	School Culture	Candidate refers to a relationship between instructional leadership and school culture.	“There’s a strong culture that exists within our school of interim assessments, data analysis, and reteaching for all courses.”
	School Improvement	Candidate refers to the importance of addressing the needs of the school through the project.	“I want to use each of these practicum projects to make a lasting impact on my school.”

	Student Outcomes	Candidate refers to a relationship between instructional leadership and student outcomes.	"We only made [#] percentage points gross [on the assessment]. We didn't hit our goal. So I'm curious, like, what could I have done differently to do that?"
	Systems	Candidate refers to a system that supports instructional leadership or affects instructional success.	"If we change our procedures that we used to [influence student outcomes], this will make a lasting impact on my school."
	Teacher Outcomes	Candidate refers to a relationship between instructional leadership and teacher outcomes.	"[Teachers] think they're doing everything they can and beyond, where it's like, you're just trying to steer them in the right direction, or let them see out a different window."
Process of Becoming a Leader	Gaining Confidence	Candidate describes growing confidence on the path to becoming a leader.	"I'm much more confident in my abilities, probably from everything I have learned."
	Changing Behavior	Candidate describes a change in behavior on the path to becoming a leader.	"Instead of just being a teacher who... accepts the way that it is, I feel like I now have the ability to look at an issue that we're having within the school and come up with a solid plan to try and fix it."
	Experiencing Difficulty	Candidate describes the process of becoming a leader as difficult or uncomfortable.	"Everyone probably thinks leading is a lot easier until they actually do it."
	Experiencing or Overcoming Fear	Candidate describes feeling afraid during the process of becoming a leader <i>or</i> describes how they are working to overcome fear.	"I was really worried about coming to [my administrators] with this because, you know, saying 'We're doing [this system] all wrong...' that's pretty brave to go in there and say that."
	Practicing Influence	Candidate describes the importance of practicing influence.	"Finding a way to get everyone... involved and on board, and... [taking] ownership in what's best for [students]."
	Increasing Knowledge	Candidate describes gaining more functional knowledge on the path to becoming a leader.	"It's almost like a principal has to be an expert in every single classroom, in every single field, in order to be able to be an instructional leader."
	Building or Managing Relationships	Candidate describes changing their approach to relationships with others when becoming a leader.	"Somehow got to find a way to... push teamwork. We're all... one team."
	General Reflection	Candidate describes practicing reflection on the path to becoming a leader.	"I'll definitely learn from my mistakes." "I'm coming up with my own thinking and I'm not letting somebody tell me their point of view."
Future as a Principal	Future as a Principal - Confident	Candidate speaks about future as an instructional leader with confidence.	"I would definitely feel even more confident in leading [a similar project in the future] because... I'm a learn-from-experience kind of person."
	Future as a Principal - Hesitant	Candidate speaks about future as an instructional leader with hesitance.	"I didn't want to be a principal at first... I still actually am not sure that I want to, but... because I just didn't want to lose the relationship with the

			kids."
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### *Documenting TILS Coverage*

This capstone project also sought to understand the extent to which instructional leadership candidates were able to practice TILS competencies. During the coding process, I documented the TILS indicators that participants reported practicing and noted the frequency with which they appeared. I did not include the first round of interviews in this exercise, focusing instead on the indicators that candidates reported practicing at the end of the fall and spring semesters. I generated a heat map that represents whether or not participants practiced an indicator in practicum projects and the frequency with which participants practiced the indicator throughout the year. (For example, whether an indicator appeared in zero, one, two, three, four, or five or more practicum projects.) This heat map is included in response to Project Question 1.

### **Findings**

**Project Question 1: How do practicum courses at Tulip Tree University help instructional leadership candidates apply their learning from core classes to leadership challenges in the field?**

***Finding 1a: Practicum projects helped participants practice some TILS indicators more often than other indicators.***

Candidates in Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program serve as current educators in PreK-12 schools in Tennessee. Candidates' practicum projects, therefore, take place in the same schools where candidates work. Individualized, site-specific practicum projects make it possible for candidates to address real challenges and apply leadership skills in candidates' own school communities, practices which are consistent with high-value field experiences as described in the literature (Chandler et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2009). However, the diverse nature of candidates' schools means that opportunities to practice instructional leadership during field experiences vary. A practicum project which may be appropriate for one school may not make sense at another school, and highly personalized practicum projects may lead candidates to

develop TILS competencies at different rates and to different degrees as candidates work to address the challenges specific to their own schools.

To understand how practicum courses at Tulip Tree University helped instructional leadership candidates apply their learning from core classes to leadership challenges in the field, it was first necessary to determine TILS coverage in practicum projects. Classes at Tulip Tree University are deliberately aligned to the TILS, and practicum projects are often used to reinforce the leadership skills outlined in the standards emphasized in different classes. At the same time, candidates are free to design projects based on indicators across all four standards. While a class might focus on Standard A, for example, a candidate's practicum project for the same class might address Standard A *and also* Standard B. Additionally, a practicum project for the same class might address some, but not all, of the indicators associated with Standard A. Since practicum projects do not guarantee uniform practice with all standards and indicators, it is useful to explore which standards and indicators participants were - and were not - practicing through their field experiences at the time this capstone project took place.

To determine standards coverage, I reviewed transcripts from participants' interviews in the second and third data collection windows (in December 2021 and April 2022). In this review, I noted which standards and indicators each participant believed they were practicing in their practicum projects. I triangulated this review using transcripts from observations of participants' practicum project presentations. Observations and interviews took place within five days of each other and candidates did not add or remove standards or indicators from their projects during that time. Most of the time, the standards and indicators that candidates reported practicing in their practicum project presentations aligned with the standards and indicators that candidates reflected on during their interviews. After determining the frequency of each standard and

indicator, I generated a heat map to represent the extent to which participants applied their learning to leadership challenges in their schools. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2: TILS Coverage in Practicum Projects, 2021-2022

	0	1	2	3	4	5+	
TILS	Indicator Number and Description						Occurrence
<b>Standard A: Instructional Leadership for Continuous Improvement</b>	1. Collaborates with stakeholders to establish and communicate a clear, compelling, shared vision for continuous school improvement.						4
	2. Builds capacity of educators to provide each student a rigorous curriculum aligned with the Tennessee Academic Standards.						2
	3. Collaborates with educators to analyze and use multiple forms of data throughout the year to establish specific goals and strategies targeting each student's achievement and growth.						5+
	4. Empowers educators to develop and execute interventions to address each student's learning needs, grounded in multiple sources of data (academic, social, and/or emotional).						1
	5. Systematically monitors and adjusts progress toward established goals and facilitates procedures and practices leading to continuous school improvement.						3
<b>Standard B: Culture for Teaching and Learning</b>	1. Collaborates with stakeholders to establish and communicate a clear, compelling, shared vision for a culture conducive to teaching and learning.						0
	2. Leverages educator strengths to ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers and meaningful, relevant, and equitable learning opportunities.						1
	3. Fosters a safe, respectful, and orderly environment that cultivates an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community for each student.						1
	4. Takes measures to actively involve families in the culturally responsive education of each student.						2
	5. Models and communicates expectations for individual and shared ownership of student, educator, and school success regardless of race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status.						1
	6. Recognizes and celebrates improved educator and student performance related to school vision and goals.						1
<b>Standard C: Professional Learning and Growth</b>	1. Collaborates with stakeholders to establish, communicate, and facilitate a clear, compelling, shared vision for professional learning and growth.						0
	2. Implements and monitors a rigorous evaluation system using an approved Tennessee evaluation model.						0
	3. Uses educator evaluation data to inform, assess, and adjust professional learning goals and plans.						0
	4. Engages faculty and self in data-informed, differentiated professional learning opportunities that promote the academic success and well-being of each student and are aligned with the Tennessee Standards for Professional Learning.						0
	5. Collaborates with others to recruit, induct, support, retain, and develop effective educators using various strategies based on						0

	multiple sources of data.	
	6. Identifies and supports potential teacher leaders and provides growth opportunities in alignment with the Tennessee Teacher Leadership Standards.	1
	7. Improves self-practice based on multiple sources of feedback, including performance evaluation results and self-reflection.	0
<b>Standard D: Resource Management</b>	1. Strategically and equitably utilizes community resources and partners to support the school's shared mission, vision, and goals.	3
	2. Includes a diverse set of educators and stakeholders in school improvement decisions.	1
	3. Establishes, communicates, and enforces a set of standard operating procedures and routines that are equitable, culturally responsive, and aligned with district, state, and federal policy.	0
	4. Performs all budgetary responsibilities with accuracy, transparency, and in the best interest of students and staff.	3

My analysis of TILS coverage revealed that multiple projects aligned to indicators in Standard A, which deals with school improvement and student outcomes, and few projects aligned to indicators in Standard C, which deals with educator effectiveness. Participants reported using practicum projects to practice Standard A: Instructional Leadership for Continuous Improvement most frequently (17 instances), followed by Standard D: Resource Management (seven instances), Standard B: Culture for Teaching and Learning (six instances), and Standard C: Professional Learning and Growth (one instance). Participants most often aligned practicum projects to Standard A.3, which reads that instructional leaders “[Collaborate] with educators to analyze and use multiple forms of data throughout the year to establish specific goals and strategies targeting each student’s achievement and growth” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, p. 1). In addition, Standards A.1, A.3, A.5, and B. 4 appeared in projects in both the fall and spring semesters. This analysis suggests that candidates in Tulip Tree University’s Instructional Leadership Program most often led projects that focused on impacting students’ academic performance but did not often lead projects that involved the development of other educators.

There could be several reasons for the variability in TILS coverage in practicum projects. Participants may have felt more comfortable with designing and leading projects associated with some standards or may have had a stronger understanding of what leadership associated with some standards looks like. Variability could also suggest that participants’ professional site mentors (the principals and assistant principals who supervised practicum projects) were more likely to encourage participants to design projects associated with some standards rather than others. Although this variability allows projects to address the unique needs and challenges of candidates’ schools, it also suggests that field experiences currently provide an opportunity for

candidates to develop some of the TILS to a greater extent than others. Candidates may require more support from Tulip Tree University in order to gain hands-on experience with all standards and indicators before graduating from the Instructional Leadership Program.

This finding could point to one limitation of Tulip Tree University's current approach to practicum projects. The Instructional Leadership Program is designed for current Tennessee educators and many candidates in the program actively serve as PreK-12 teachers. As teachers, candidates may have less opportunity to practice key leadership skills like implementing a teacher evaluation system (Standard C.2), using evaluation data to set professional learning goals (Standard C.3), and recruiting, inducting, supporting, and retaining educators (Standard C.5). Since the leadership behaviors described in these indicators impact teacher pay, promotion, and retention, it would be unethical for current teachers to practice these indicators in a practicum project, as doing so would position candidates to exercise an undue influence on their peers.

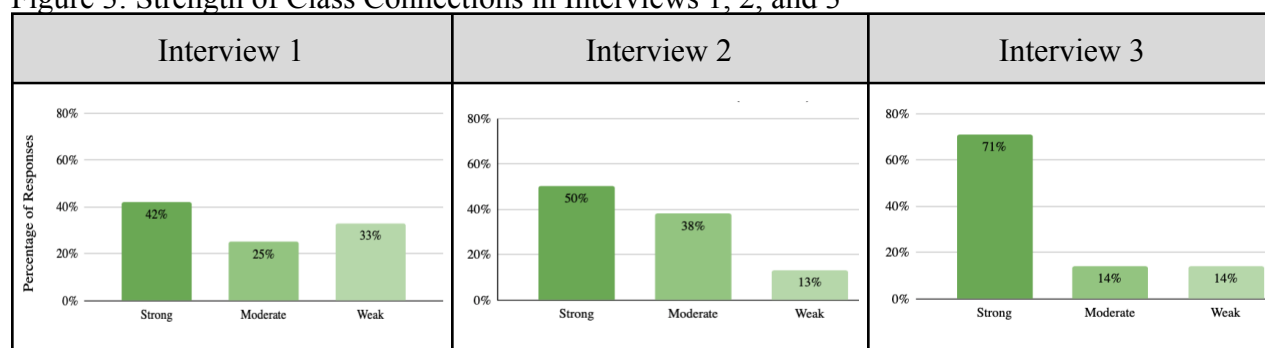
***Finding 1b: Over the course of the program, participants gained a stronger understanding of the TILS they practiced.***

While participants reported practicing different TILS standards and indicators during interviews and observations, they described their practicum projects' connections to the TILS with varying levels of fluency. Experiential Learning Theory suggests that learning relies on learners' abilities to experience events, reflect on their experiences, and change their behavior or thinking as a result of their reflection. Participants in this capstone project occasionally struggled to describe the TILS indicators that they had practiced in their practicum projects, especially when interviewed during earlier data collection windows. This uncertainty could impact how participants were able to apply their learning from classes at Tulip Tree University and limit participants' abilities to engage effectively in the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization abilities of the experiential learning cycle.

Participants' reflections regarding their practice with the TILS revealed “strong,” “moderate,” or “weak” connections between practicum projects and the TILS-aligned content that participants learned about in classes at Tulip Tree University. Participants sometimes made connections between their practicum project and the TILS directly, and sometimes made connections between their practicum project and the content that had been introduced in the TILS-aligned class for which the project was required. These connections occasionally varied during the same interview: a participant might have described one indicator they had practiced in their practicum projects with a strong degree of fluency but struggled to discuss another. I define “strong,” “moderate,” and “weak” class connections in my excerpted codebook in Table 2.

I reviewed coded transcripts to determine participants' understanding of the TILS indicators they practiced – that is, whether participants demonstrated a “strong,” “moderate,” or “weak” class connection *or* a combination of different types of connections. I used a series of bar graphs to depict how participants' understanding of the TILS changed within the group over time. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3: Strength of Class Connections in Interviews 1, 2, and 3

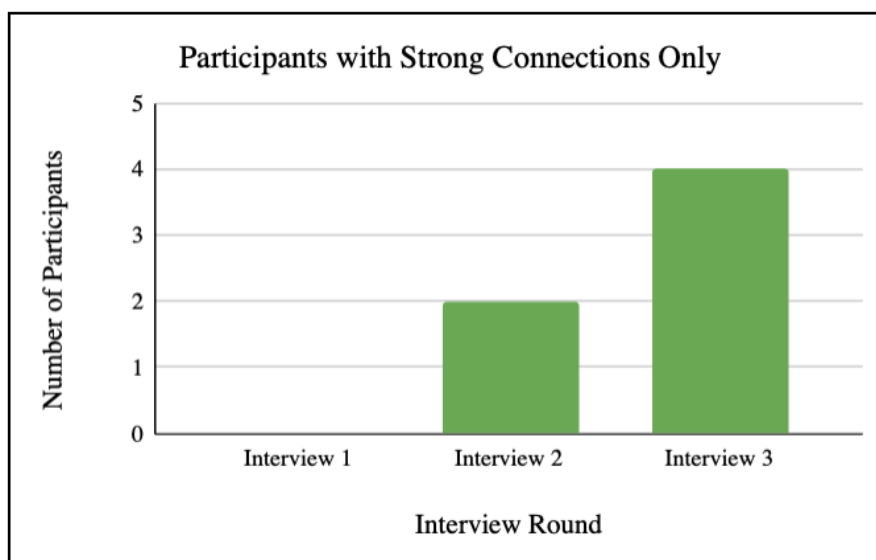


These data reveal that the number of “strong” class connections increased and the number of “moderate” or “weak” class connections decreased between Interview 1 and Interview 3. In the first round of interviews, only 42% of responses demonstrated a “strong” connection between

participants' TILS-aligned core coursework and their practicum projects. By the third round of interviews, 71% of responses demonstrated a "strong" connection. Meanwhile, "moderate" and "weak" class connections declined between the first and third interviews. This pattern suggests that as participants progressed through Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program, they were better able to discuss how their practicum projects related to content shared in a TILS-aligned class and explain how their projects helped them practice the TILS.

As I described above, candidates could demonstrate "strong," "moderate," and "weak" class connections during the same interview. Therefore, it is also important to determine the number of participants who exclusively shared "strong" class connections during their interview. "Strong" class connections indicate that the participant clearly and accurately described the TILS indicators their practicum project targeted and suggest that the participant was aware of how their practicum project allowed them to practice and master these indicators. This awareness is critical to the first ability in Experiential Learning Theory ("concrete experience") and participants' reflections on their practice is critical to the second ability ("reflective observation"). Participants who had a strong understanding of how their practicum project connected to the TILS, and how their project helped them practice the TILS indicators, could then progress to the next abilities in the experiential learning cycle. Figure 4 depicts the number of participants who demonstrated only "strong" class connections during each interview round.

Figure 4: Participants with “Strong” Connections Only in Interviews 1, 2, and 3



By the end of this capstone project, 80% of participants (four out of five) shared only “strong” class connections during their third interviews. For this to be possible, participants needed to identify each TILS indicator they had practiced in their practicum projects and accurately relate the particular characteristics of those standards to their projects. Additionally, participants might also have demonstrated “strong” class connections by recalling how they had applied something they had learned in a TILS-aligned class at Tulip Tree University to their project’s design or implementation. This phenomenon is significant because it suggests that participants were able to apply their learning from core classes to the leadership challenges they encountered during field experiences *and* could effectively reflect on how this application helped them to practice the key leadership competencies required of instructional leaders in Tennessee. While participants were not able to practice every TILS indicator in the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters, the majority of participants in this capstone project gained a “strong” degree of fluency with the indicators that they did practice.

**Project Question 2: How do instructional leadership candidates perceive that field experiences support their development according to state-defined instructional leadership competencies (TILS)?**

My analysis of Project Question 1 identified the TILS indicators that participants reported practicing in their practicum work and told me more about participants' abilities to discuss how these indicators affected the design and implementation of their practicum projects. Project Question 2 focused on how candidates perceived that they were able to practice these leadership competencies and develop their abilities as ethical and effective instructional leaders. The following analysis of Project Question 2 reveals that participants perceived that practicum projects helped them to develop particular understandings of the purpose of instructional leadership and supported participants' reflections related to the process of becoming an instructional leader. Findings 2a and 2b also address the current nature of practicum projects in supporting participants to engage with each of the four abilities in the experiential learning cycle and suggest that participants may be "getting stuck" in some parts of the cycle, which would impact practicum projects' effectiveness in supporting participants' learning and development. The following findings share more about how candidates at Tulip Tree University perceived that field experiences supported their development as instructional leaders who aspired to be both ethical and effective in their work.

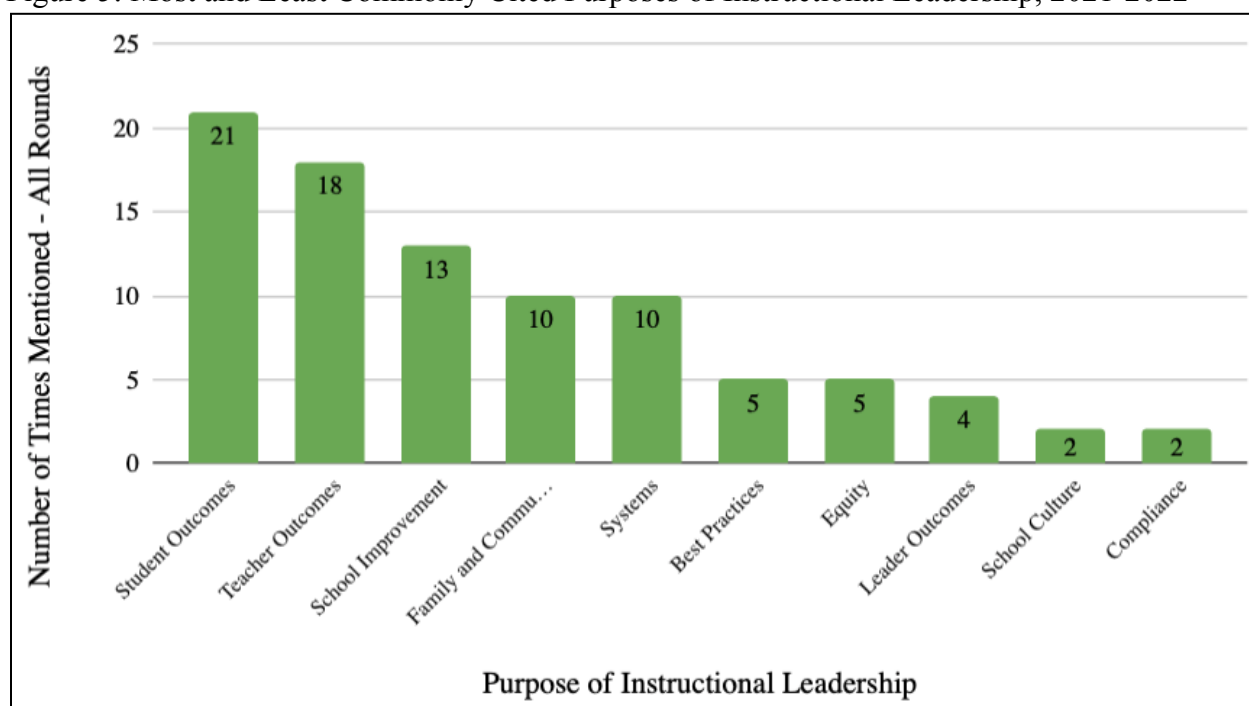
***Finding 2a: Participants' individual understandings of the purpose of instructional leadership changed over the course of the program, but the most common beliefs remained largely consistent.***

Candidates' approach to ethical and effective leadership are motivated by candidates' understanding of the *purpose* of instructional leadership. Participants in this capstone project held different understandings of the purpose of instructional leadership in PreK-12 schools and these understandings changed over time. Participants often indicated their beliefs in more than



one purpose of instructional leadership simultaneously and revised their beliefs while enrolled in the Instructional Leadership Program. In one interview round, for example, one participant indicated their belief that instructional leaders must follow best practices, support student outcomes, maintain effective systems, and influence teacher outcomes. In a later interview round, the same participant discussed an instructional leader's role in supporting school culture and school improvement in addition to supporting student outcomes and teacher outcomes. These responses suggest that the participant expanded their understanding of the purpose of instructional leadership and conducted projects that emphasized different purposes of instructional leadership during their time in Tulip Tree University's program. Participants' beliefs about the purpose of instructional leadership also varied across interviews and observations: a participant might have referred to one purpose of instructional leadership during the observation of their capstone project presentation and discussed a different purpose of instructional leadership during their interview a few days later. I identified ten different ways that participants understood the purpose of instructional leadership and captured these definitions in my codebook in Table 2.

Interview Question 3 prompted participants' perceptions and reflections about what they were learning about instructional leadership in their practicum projects. I coded participants' interview and observation transcripts and then reviewed these codes to determine participants' beliefs about the purpose of instructional leadership. Figure 5 depicts the frequency with which participants mentioned each of the ten purposes of instructional leadership over the course of this capstone project.

Figure 5: Most and Least Commonly Cited Purposes of Instructional Leadership, 2021-2022<sup>5</sup>

Although participants' individual perceptions changed over time, the most common beliefs across the sample of participants remained largely consistent between the first, second, and third round interviews. Interviews and observations revealed that participants most often believed that the purpose of instructional leadership was to support student outcomes (cited in 91% of transcripts), teacher outcomes (cited in 78% of transcripts), and school improvement (cited in 57% of transcripts). These responses suggested a belief among participants that ethical and effective instructional leaders have a responsibility to lead initiatives that address a need in the school and positively affect student and teacher results. Table 3 describes the frequency with which the most common purposes of instructional leadership were mentioned across the duration of this capstone project.

<sup>5</sup> If a participant discussed a specific "Purpose of Instructional Leadership" in their interview or observation, that purpose is represented only once in Figure 5. For example, "Family and Community Engagement" was mentioned by one participant during Interview 1, two participants during Observation 1, two participants during Interview 2, two participants during Observation 2, and three participants during Interview 3. Therefore, "Family and Community Engagement" was cited as a purpose for instructional leadership in 10 total interviews or observations.

Table 3: Percent of Participants Citing Each Purpose of Instructional Leadership in Each Interview Round

Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Student Outcomes (80%) Teacher Outcomes (80%)	Student Outcomes (100%) Teacher Outcomes (100%) School Improvement (80%) Systems (60%)	Student Outcomes (100%) School Improvement (100%) Teacher Outcomes (60%) Family and Community Engagement (60%)

Note: I only included those purposes that were cited by at least half of participants in this table.

While the TILS outline the desired competencies that instructional leadership candidates must master, there are multiple actions that candidates can take to demonstrate their abilities as “ethical and effective” leaders. This finding suggests that participants were using practicum projects as a way to practice skills and develop leadership abilities that achieved specific instructional leadership purposes. These abilities supported the TILS’ mission to “ensure that school personnel, programs, procedures, and practices focus on the learning and achievement of all students” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, p. 1). However, some participants referred to beliefs about the purpose of instructional leadership that, while less often observed, are nevertheless appropriate in addressing the TILS. For example, an instructional leader’s role in ensuring equity (IL - E) was observed in 22% of transcripts but may be necessary to “create and sustain conditions for effective learning” for the diverse student populations in Tennessee’s PreK-12 schools (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, p. 1). Similarly, an instructional leader’s role in managing other leaders towards success (IL - LO) was observed in only 17% of transcripts but may be a critical ability when meeting the TILS’ goal to empower “districts to build a network of exceptional instructional leaders who get results” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, p. 1).

The experiential learning cycle suggests that for learning to take place, participants must

reflect on their experiences and integrate their reflection into their existing ideas before changes in behavior or mindset can occur. It is possible that practicum projects *were* helping candidates to develop leadership abilities that help them to lead for equity and manage other leaders toward success (in addition to other, less commonly cited purposes of instructional leadership in Figure 5), but many participants did not share reflections on these purposes of instructional leadership during their interviews. Without deliberate space for such reflection, participants may have been missing an opportunity to notice their development in these areas *or* to use practicum projects to help them expand and refine their beliefs regarding the purpose of instructional leadership. Therefore, participants may have been “getting stuck” in the first and second abilities (“concrete experience” and “reflective observation”) when it came to developing their understandings of some purposes of instructional leadership.

***Finding 2b: Practicum projects helped participants reflect on the process of becoming a leader. However, participants did not often use the practicum project presentations as a way to share these reflections.***

The TILS intend to “transform what it means to be an effective instructional leader at all phases of a leader’s career” (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, p. 1). Since this capstone project concentrates on an instructional leadership preparation program, it aims to capture the experiences of educators at Tulip Tree University who are in the earlier stages of their careers as PreK-12 instructional leaders in Tennessee. Participants experienced the process of becoming an ethical and effective leader in unique ways, and their perceptions as to how field experiences helped them develop their competencies as instructional leaders differed as well. Participants most often shared general reflections on the path to becoming a leader (present in 65% of transcripts) and described changing their approach to relationships with others (57%) and increasing their functional knowledge (48%) as they practiced leadership abilities through

practicum projects. Participants' reflections on the process of becoming a leader also varied over time: a participant might have discussed how they changed their behavior and experienced difficulty during Interview 1, for example, and discussed how they increased their knowledge, built and managed relationships, gained confidence, and experienced or overcame fear during Interview 3. Table 4 captures participants' reflections on the process of becoming a leader as represented in the codebook and provides the rate at which participants voiced different reflections across 23 interviews and observations.

Table 4: Rate of Participants' Reflections on the Process of Becoming a Leader - All Interview and Observation Rounds

Code	Rate Mentioned
General Reflection (BL - R)	15 (65%)
Building or Managing Relationships (BL - MR)	13 (57%)
Increasing Knowledge (BL - K)	11 (48%)
Experiencing or Overcoming Fear (BL - F)	8 (35%)
Practicing Influence (BL - I)	7 (30%)
Gaining Confidence (BL - C)	7 (30%)
Changing Behavior (BL - CB)	6 (26%)
Experiencing Difficulty (BL - D)	4 (17%)

Although participants frequently reflected on the process of becoming a leader when asked about their leadership development during interviews, they did not often use practicum project presentations as a way to share these reflections with their professors and their peers. Participants shared their reflections on the process of becoming a leader far more often during one-on-one interviews than during observations of their practicum project presentations. I captured all eight codes while reviewing interview transcripts during the first, second, and third

rounds of data collection, but captured only three codes during the first observations and only one code during the second observations. This suggests that practicum project presentations, as currently designed, may not necessarily facilitate the entire experiential learning cycle.

Experiential Learning Theory requires that learners engage in “concrete experience” and “reflective observation” before they are able to integrate new understandings with existing ideas (“abstract conceptualization”) and plan to practice new behaviors (“active experimentation”). Practicum project presentations currently support learners to participate in “concrete experiences” (through participation in the practicum project itself) and some “reflective observation” (through the practicum project presentations), though not in a formalized way. Presentation guidelines should be adjusted to support “abstract conceptualization” and “active experimentation” as well to capture the reflection and integration that participants were already experiencing on their own. Such adjustments could improve the chances that participants are not “getting stuck” between “reflective observation” and “abstract conceptualization” as they seek to develop their leadership competencies through TILS-aligned practicum projects.

**Project Question 3: How confident are instructional leadership candidates that they will be able to apply instructional leadership competencies to future settings and scenarios?**

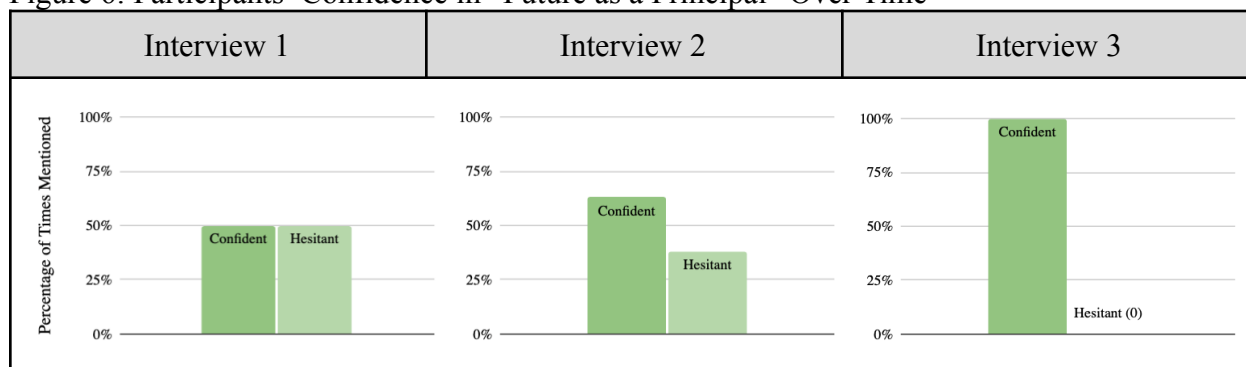
***Finding 3: By the end of this capstone project, all participants expressed confidence in their abilities to serve as instructional leaders in Tennessee.***

Interview Question 4 invited participants’ reflections regarding their perceived preparation to address future leadership challenges similar to those they encountered during their practicum projects. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed their “Future as a Principal” with hesitance or confidence. (It is worth noting that no participants spoke about their future as an instructional leader with pessimism during any interview or observation.) In “hesitant” responses, participants voiced some level of doubt about their future as an

instructional leader. This doubt often arose from participants' uncertainties that they would *want* to or would be *chosen* to pursue instructional leadership opportunities in the future, and not from an apprehension that they would be *unable* to perform the responsibilities associated with instructional leadership. On the other hand, "confident" responses indicated that candidates felt prepared to pursue instructional leadership opportunities as a result of their participation in practicum projects. A confident response might have also indicated a participant's intention to apply for or hold an instructional leadership position upon graduation from the instructional leadership preparation program, suggesting that participants felt that they were "on track" towards becoming effective and ethical leaders as they progressed through the program.

To determine confidence over time, I coded participants' interview transcripts using codes that captured "Future as a Principal - Hesitant" and "Future as a Principal - Confident." I reviewed coded transcripts to determine how confidence changed over time. Not every participant discussed their future as a principal in every interview, and participants often described their future as a principal using both hesitant and confident responses. This was especially true in earlier data collection windows. Figure 6 displays how participants' confidence in their futures as instructional leaders changed during this capstone project.

Figure 6: Participants' Confidence in "Future as a Principal" Over Time



Although participants responded with both confidence and hesitance in earlier data collection windows, 100% of participants (five of five) shared *only* confident responses when discussing their futures as instructional leaders during the third interview. This finding suggests that practicum projects effectively help to improve participants' confidence in their leadership abilities over time. Not only did participants feel confident that they could independently lead initiatives that address similar instructional leadership challenges as those encountered in their practicum projects, but many participants also looked forward to serving in a future instructional leadership role in their districts and schools.

### **Recommendations**

The findings in the previous section suggest that Tulip Tree University's use of practicum projects in the instructional leadership preparation program effectively helped participants practice some indicators in the TILS (represented in Findings 1a and 1b) *and* positively influenced participants' confidence in their capabilities as future instructional leaders (represented in Finding 3). As I discuss in the literature review, studies suggest that exemplary leadership preparation programs leverage high-quality internships (including field experiences), align curriculum to professional standards, and provide opportunities for candidates to practice and reflect on their leadership skills and abilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr, 2010). The following recommendations are grounded in these findings from the literature along with the findings from this project and aim to expand the Instructional Leadership Program's effectiveness in supporting candidates' leadership development according to multiple aspects of the TILS.



**Recommendation 1: Tulip Tree University should require that instructional leadership candidates practice indicators from multiple TILS in each practicum project, with special considerations for Standard C.**

My analyses revealed that participants practiced some TILS indicators more frequently than others in their practicum projects (Finding 1a). While core classes in Tulip Tree University's instructional leadership preparation program focus on particular TILS, candidates have the flexibility to select the TILS indicators that they wish to focus on during their practicum projects. Candidates may also choose to design practicum projects that align to TILS indicators which are not emphasized in the candidates' core class that semester. For example, a candidate could be enrolled in a course which focuses on Standard B. The candidate's practicum project for this course might align to indicators in Standard B *or* might align to indicators in another standard which is not emphasized in the course. Although candidates have the flexibility to design practicum projects that address a variety of TILS indicators, participants in this capstone project practiced indicators from Standard A: Instructional Leadership for Continuous Improvement 17 times, indicators from Standard D: Resource Management seven times, indicators from Standard B: Culture for Teaching and Learning six times, and indicators from Standard C: Professional Learning and Growth only once during their field experiences. This suggests that field experiences have been helping candidates develop instructional leadership competencies associated with some, but not all, of the TILS indicators.

Participants' repeated practice with Standard A during practicum projects may also be contributing to their understanding of the purpose of instructional leadership. The Tennessee State Board of Education explains that "ethical and effective" leadership actions associated with Standard A involve facilitating "professional practice that continually improves each student's learning" (2018b, p. 1). In Finding 2a, I determined that participants most often described their

beliefs that the purpose of instructional leadership is to (1) support student outcomes, (2) improve teacher outcomes, and (3) facilitate school improvement. Repeated practice with indicators in Standard A may be helping shape participants' understanding of what instructional leaders do in the field: that is, instructional leaders influence *teacher outcomes* in order to affect *student outcomes* and drive toward *school improvement*. If participants had repeated practice with a different standard (Standard B: Culture for Learning and Teaching, for example), I might have heard participants perceive their development as leaders and describe the purpose of instructional leadership differently. Since Standard B has to do with "creat[ing] and sustain[ing] an inclusive, respectful, and safe environment providing equitable educational opportunities," the most commonly cited purposes of instructional leadership might instead have been teacher outcomes, family and community engagement, and equity (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2018b, p. 1).

Tulip Tree University should promote more comprehensive TILS coverage and support candidates in developing a broader understanding of the purpose of instructional leadership by requiring that candidates practice indicators from multiple TILS in each practicum project. This change would require candidates to identify multiple focus indicators before designing their practicum projects. Candidates would also need to approach their mentoring principals and assistant principals with these focus indicators in mind in order to identify opportunities to lead practicum projects that both address a need at the school site *and* support the candidate in developing specific leadership competencies. This change would increase candidates' access to leadership challenges associated with less commonly practiced TILS indicators and would help candidates gain familiarity with challenges that emphasize the different actions and mindsets associated with ethical and effective instructional leadership. This approach would also build on

the existing effectiveness of Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program by providing learning opportunities associated with an expanded range of professional standards and making space for candidates to practice and reflect on a variety of leadership skills, both of which are features of exemplary leadership preparation programs.

Requiring candidates to practice multiple TILS in each practicum project does not guarantee that candidates will be *able* to practice all TILS indicators via field experiences. Tulip Tree University should consider designing additional structures to help candidates practice Standard C: Professional Learning and Growth, since it may be neither possible nor ethical for candidates to lead projects aligned to certain indicators in Standard C during their time in the Instructional Leadership Program. Instead, Tulip Tree University might facilitate this practice through in-class learning opportunities including case studies, role-plays, and other performance tasks that provide hypothetical examples of leadership challenges associated with Standard C. In this way, candidates could practice addressing all indicators of Standard C using certain features of high-value field experiences described in the literature (like hands-on learning, aligning with real challenges, and resembling the actual work of school leaders) (Chandler et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2009).

**Recommendation 2: Tulip Tree University should support instructional leadership candidates to reflect on the various purposes of instructional leadership and the process of becoming a leader during practicum project presentations.**

Participants often shared their reflections on the various purposes of instructional leadership and the process of becoming a leader during interviews for this capstone project. However, participants referred to these reflections less often when sharing the results of their practicum projects during the formal presentations at the end of each semester. Practicum project presentations call for candidates to complete a field experience and share a description of their

project (including the project's design, TILS alignment, and progress or results) with their classmates and university faculty. While participants often used these presentations to reflect on *what they did* during their practicum projects, they less often described *what they learned about instructional leadership* in these projects. This is particularly true for participants' reflections on the process of becoming a leader, as described in Finding 2b. This pattern suggests that while instructional leadership candidates may be making sense of their development as a leader independently, they may not have an opportunity to formally reflect on the ways that field experiences have supported their leadership development according to the TILS. As a result, participants may be engaging with some, but not all, of the abilities described in Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Partial engagement with the experiential learning cycle may limit the effectiveness of field experiences in supporting candidates' development as instructional leaders.

Practicum project presentations may be successfully facilitating candidates' engagement with concrete experience (the first ability in the experiential learning cycle) and partially supporting candidates' engagement with reflective observation (the second ability). To complete the experiential learning cycle, participants would benefit from support in (1) sharing what they have learned about instructional leadership (the second ability), (2) comparing what they have learned with their previously held beliefs or ideas about instructional leadership (the third ability), and (3) planning future opportunities for active experimentation with their new ideas (the fourth and final ability).

Tulip Tree University could advance the experiential learning cycle in practicum project presentations by emphasizing certain elements in the defense rubric that is used to evaluate practicum project presentations. I propose that Tulip Tree University include an indicator on the defense rubric aligned to "self-reflection and insight" to emphasize the importance of reflection

throughout practicum experiences and prompt all candidates to engage in the practice of reflection while preparing to discuss their field experiences with others. To further support candidates' learning and development, the scoring criteria at each level of the indicator could align with the learning abilities outlined in the experiential learning cycle. That is, scoring criteria associated with this indicator could prompt candidates to reflect on the purpose of instructional leadership or the process of becoming a leader (reflective observation), integrate these reflections with existing ideas (abstract conceptualization), and propose a means by which to continue to practice and refine these behaviors and beliefs (active experimentation). In this way, candidates' reflections can be recognized and brought forward as an important step in the journey toward becoming ethical and effective instructional leaders.

### **Discussion and Limitations**

In this capstone project, I sought to understand how field experiences prepared instructional leadership candidates at Tulip Tree University for the future work of school leadership: specifically, how the university's use of practicum projects helped candidates apply their learning from core classes, develop leadership competencies according to the TILS, and grow their confidence as instructional leaders. My analysis of interview and observation transcripts with current instructional leadership candidates suggested that practicum projects *do* help participants apply their learning from class to meaningful instructional leadership challenges while simultaneously improving participants' fluency with the TILS and confidence in their abilities to lead. I also found that participants practice some TILS indicators more often than others, which may influence participants' perceptions of the purpose of instructional leadership and their understanding of their own development. Additionally, participants did not often use practicum project presentations as a way to share their reflections on their perceived

self-development as leaders. Experiential Learning Theory proposes that effective development relies on learners' abilities to experience events, reflect on their experiences, integrate new reflections with existing ideas, and practice revised ideas in new contexts. Therefore, candidates' learning in Tulip Tree University's program could be strengthened even further if candidates had the opportunity to practice instructional leadership through a variety of leadership challenges (that is, challenges aligned to TILS indicators across multiple standards) *and* were encouraged to process their experiences using the four abilities outlined in the experiential learning cycle during practicum project presentations. The recommendations section of this capstone project outlines where and how Tulip Tree University might adjust the current guidelines and rubric associated with practicum project presentations to help candidates plan for opportunities to practice diverse aspects of instructional leadership and reflect on their practice.

There are some important limitations to consider when reviewing and applying the findings I shared in this capstone project. First, I used an exclusively qualitative methodology in the design of this capstone project. The findings and recommendations proposed here are therefore the product of what I heard and understood during observations and interviews related to this project. I have attempted to support the reliability of the findings by developing a codebook that explains how and why I assigned meaning to the different ideas that participants shared. However, were this project to be repeated under the direction of a different principal investigator, the findings could differ.

This project also generated data using observations of practicum project presentations, which represent a small portion of the dialogue, discussion, and learning that takes place during a semester of graduate-level coursework. It is possible that Tulip Tree University *already* addresses some of the recommendations during regular class assignments: for example,

candidates may already use differentiated, in-class scenarios to support practice associated with Standard C and may already use other assignments to continuously reflect on their emerging beliefs about the purpose of instructional leadership and their development as leaders. The recommendations provided here are intended to address the learning represented during the practicum projects themselves and might not necessarily fully reflect the learning that takes place in the core classes with which these practicum projects are associated.

Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program shares features commonly associated with exemplary programs, and practicum projects effectively support candidates' competence and confidence associated with the leadership skills that they are able to practice first-hand. Expanding candidates' practice with all TILS indicators and providing candidates with formal opportunities to reflect on their leadership development will help them feel highly prepared for the various instructional leadership challenges that await them as future principals and assistant principal in Tennessee's PreK-12 schools.

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## Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

Good afternoon [Name],

My name is Sarah Savage and I am an Ed.D. candidate studying Leadership and Learning in Organizations at Vanderbilt University. As part of my studies, I am working with Tulip Tree University's Instructional Leadership Program to better understand how the program's practicum experiences prepare instructional leadership students to lead in Tennessee's PreK-12 schools. I would like to interview you to learn more about your perspective and experiences as a student in Tulip Tree University's practicum courses.

These interviews would take place three times during the 2021-2022 academic year and each interview would last about 45 minutes. Interviews could take place by phone, over Zoom, or in person depending on your preference and schedule. Participation in these interviews is voluntary and your identity will be kept confidential. This project will also ask if you would be willing to allow your practicum project presentations in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 to be observed and audio recorded for the purposes of this project. These recordings will be used to identify and compare themes across interviews and observations and will be saved in a secure location.

If you would be willing to participate in these interviews, please review and sign the participant consent form using [this link]. Then, please indicate your interview preferences and availability using [this link] by Wednesday, October 20, 2021. I will reach out to you to schedule an interview time based on your preferences and availability.

If you have any questions about this project, please reach out to me at sarah.e.savage@vanderbilt.edu or contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Sayil Camacho, at sayil.camacho@vanderbilt.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Best,

Sarah Savage  
Ed.D. Candidate  
Vanderbilt University

### Appendix B: Data Collection Timeline

Data Collection	Event	Format	Time
First Window  *No practicum project observations in this window.	Interviewer visited practicum class to introduce herself and the project.	In person	October 2, 2021
	Initial invitation to participate in first window interviews.	Email with Google Form attached	Week of October 4, 2021
	Reminder invitation to participate in first window interviews.	Email with Google Form attached	Week of October 11, 2021
	Deadline to confirm participation in first window interviews.	Email with Google Form attached	October 20, 2021
	First window interviews took place.	In person or by Zoom or phone	October 25 - November 5, 2021
Second Window	Initial invitation to participate in second window interviews and observations.	Email with Google Form attached	Week of November 8, 2021
	Reminder invitation to participate in second window interviews and observations.	Email with Google Form attached	Week of November 15, 2021
	Deadline to confirm participation in second window interviews and observations.	Email with Google Form attached	November 24, 2021
	Second window interviews took place.	In person or by Zoom or phone	November 29 - December 10, 2021
	Fall 2021 practicum project presentation observations took place.	In person	Saturday, December 4, 2021
Third Window	Initial invitation to participate in third window interviews	Email with Google Form attached	Week of March 28, 2022
	Reminder invitation to participate in third window interviews.	Email with Google Form attached	Week of April 4, 2022
	Deadline to confirm participation in third window interviews.	Email with Google Form attached	April 13, 2022
	Third window interviews took place.	In person or by Zoom or phone	April 18 - April 29, 2022
	Spring 2021 practicum project presentation observations took place.	In person	Saturday, April 23, 2022

## Appendix C: Interview Protocols

### Interview Protocol - First Window (Fall 2021)

#### **Interview Opening**

*The interview begins with introductions and an overview of what participants can expect.*

- *The interview will last approximately 45 minutes,*
- *Participation in the interview process is voluntary.*
- *Participants will not face consequences for deciding not to participate in the interview.*
- *Participants' identities will be kept confidential and identifying details about the site will be redacted.*
- *The capstone project will use anonymous excerpts from participants' interviews to illustrate the practicum experience.*
- *Participants provide consent to interview and for their interview to be recorded.*

#### **1. Tell me about your practicum project this semester.**

- How does the practicum project connect to what you are learning in class?
- What expected learning outcomes are you using to design your practicum project?
- How are you practicing these learning outcomes in the project?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 1*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Reflective Observation*

#### **2. Each practicum project aligns to the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards. How are you getting the chance to practice these standards in your project?**

- Which indicators of Standard \_\_ have you used to design your project?
- How is this project helping you practice the leadership competencies in Standard \_\_?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 2*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Reflective Observation*

#### **3. What are you learning about instructional leadership through your practicum project?**

- How do you see your instructional leadership changing during this practicum project?
- What leadership experiences do you hope to gain through this practicum project?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 2*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Abstract Conceptualization*

#### **4. How do you think your practicum project will prepare you to take on similar instructional leadership challenges in the future?**

- What leadership competencies do you want to practice more or practice differently during this project?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 3*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Abstract Conceptualization*

#### **Interview Closing**

*The participant is thanked for their time and next steps for the interview process are shared.*

## Interview Protocol - Second Window (Fall 2021)

### Interview Opening

*The interview begins with greetings and a review of what participants can expect.*

- *The interview will last approximately 45 minutes,*
- *Participation in the interview process is voluntary.*
- *Participants will not face consequences for deciding not to participate in the interview.*
- *Participants' identities will be kept confidential and identifying details about the site will be redacted.*
- *The capstone project will use anonymous excerpts from participants' interviews to illustrate the practicum experience.*
- *Participants provide consent to interview and for their interview to be recorded.*

### 1. The first time I met you, you mentioned that your practicum project was \_\_\_\_\_. How did the project turn out?

- How did the practicum project connect to what you learned in class?
- What did you expect you would learn from the practicum project?
- How did you practice the expected learning outcomes in the project?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 1*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Reflective Observation*

### 2. Each practicum project aligns to the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards. How did you get the chance to practice these standards in your project?

- You mentioned in our first interview that you used indicators \_\_ to design your project. Are there any other indicators that emerged during the project?
- How did this project help you practice the leadership competencies in Standard \_\_?
- How often or to what extent did you think about the TILS during the project?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 2*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Reflective Observation*

### 3. What did you learn about instructional leadership through your practicum project?

- How did your leadership practice change during this practicum project?
- What made it possible to practice instructional leadership competencies in your project?
- What made it difficult to practice instructional leadership competencies in your project?
- What experiences did you hope to gain that were not part of your practicum experience?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 2*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Abstract Conceptualization*

### 4. How has your practicum project prepared you to take on similar instructional leadership challenges in the future?

- What leadership competencies do you want to practice more or practice differently in the future?
- Imagine that you are a principal or assistant principal 10 years from now. Would you feel very prepared, moderately prepared, or not prepared to lead a similar project in your own school?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 3*  
*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Abstract Conceptualization*

### **Interview Closing**

*The participant is thanked for their time and next steps for the interview process are shared.*

## **Interview Protocol - Third Window (Spring 2022)**

### **Interview Opening**

*The interview begins with greetings and a review of what participants can expect.*

- *The interview will last approximately 45 minutes,*
- *Participation in the interview process is voluntary.*
- *Participants will not face consequences for deciding not to participate in the interview.*
- *Participants' identities will be kept confidential and identifying details about the site will be redacted.*
- *The capstone project will use anonymous excerpts from participants' interviews to illustrate the practicum experience.*
- *Participants provide consent to interview and for their interview to be recorded.*

### **1. Tell me about your practicum project this semester.**

- Which class did your practicum project align with?
- How did the practicum project connect to what you learned in class?
- What expected learning outcomes did you follow when designing your practicum project?
- How did you practice these learning outcomes in the project?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 1*  
*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Reflective Observation*

### **2. Each practicum project aligns to the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards. How did you get the chance to practice these standards in your project?**

- Which indicators of Standard \_\_ did you use to design your project?
- How did this project help you practice the leadership competencies in Standard \_\_?
- How often or to what extent did you think about the TILS during the project?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 2*  
*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Reflective Observation*

### **3. What did you learn about instructional leadership through your practicum project?**

- How did your leadership practice change during this practicum project?
- What made it possible to practice instructional leadership competencies in your project?
- What made it difficult to practice instructional leadership competencies in your project?
- What experiences did you hope to gain that were not part of your practicum experience?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 2*  
*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Abstract Conceptualization*

**4. How has your practicum project prepared you to take on similar instructional leadership challenges in the future?**

- How did your learning from last semester's practicum project impact this semester's practicum project?
- What leadership competencies do you want to practice more or practice differently in the future?
- Imagine that you are a principal or assistant principal 10 years from now. Would you feel very prepared, moderately prepared, or not prepared to lead a similar project in your own school?

*Study Alignment: Project Question 3*

*Conceptual Framework Alignment: Abstract Conceptualization*

**Interview Closing**

*The participant is thanked for their time and next steps for the interview process are shared.*



### Appendix D: Qualitative Analysis Codebook

Theme	Code and Abbreviation	Description	Example	Date Introduced
Connections to Class Material	Class Connection - Strong (CCS)	Candidate discusses how the practicum project relates to content in a TILS-aligned class.  <i>or</i> Candidate discusses how the practicum project helps them practice the TILS introduced in class.	“(The project) went hand-in-hand with the work I’m doing in the assessment course right now, to focus on this important assessment and ways to improve our achievement on it in a relatively quick timeframe.”  “I had to collaborate with the teachers... to communicate what we’re going to do (in the project). That’s TILS indicator one, I think. We had the goal of changing (a system in our school). So teachers let me look at all of their data, and we compared our classrooms to each other.”	March 6
	Class Connection - Moderate (CCM)	Candidate tries to discuss the practicum project using the language or content introduced in class but sometimes hesitates or is unclear.	“Can you read me the first [standard]? I think it's, like, communicating with stakeholders, maybe?”	March 6
	Class Connection - Weak (CCW)	Candidate has difficulty identifying a connection between the practicum project and class content or cannot describe how their practicum project relates to class.	“I don't know the exact standards off the top of my head... I have to go back into the Canvas and the syllabus for the course in order to answer that.”	March 6
Purpose of Instructional Leadership	Best Practices (IL - BP)	Candidate refers to an instructional leader’s role in following “best practices” (based on research, experience, or anecdote).	“I wish there... was something that they involved [us in] where we got to go out, and they knew, 'Okay, this school is the best school in the... area... We're gonna want you to go there for... a couple of days a semester or something like that just to.... observe their principals and ask questions.”	Original
	Compliance (IL - C)	Candidate refers to an instructional leader's role in maintaining compliance.	“The district purchased this and said, ‘You will use it.’ And so, I know that as a principal, sometimes your hands are tied.”	Original
	Family & Community Engagement (IL - CE)	Candidate refers to an instructional leader's role in supporting community engagement	“My practicum mission... will... encourage more parental involvement at our school.”	Original

	Equity (IL - E)	Candidate refers to the role of instructional leaders in ensuring equity.	"I want to make sure that I'm doing the best as a leader to set an example... and that we set standards and we are inclusive and promoting, you know, different cultures and things like that... that we're including everyone."	Original
	Leader Outcomes (IL - LO)	Candidate refers to the role of instructional leaders in managing other leaders toward success.	"I delegated... this... to [a leader, who...] delegated through [their] department."	May 21
	School Culture (IL - SC)	Candidate refers to a relationship between instructional leadership and school culture.	"There's a strong culture that exists within our school of interim assessments, data analysis, and reteaching for all courses."	Original
	School Improvement (IL - SI)	Candidate refers to the importance of addressing the needs of the school through the project.	"I want to use each of these practicum projects to make a lasting impact on my school."	March 12
	Student Outcomes (IL - SO)	Candidate refers to a relationship between instructional leadership and student outcomes.	"We only made [#] percentage points gross [on the assessment]. We didn't hit our goal. So I'm curious, like, what could I have done differently to do that?"	Original
	Systems (IL - Sys)	Candidate refers to a system that supports instructional leadership or affects instructional success.	"If we change our procedures that we used to [influence student outcomes], this will make a lasting impact on my school."	Original
	Teacher Outcomes (IL - TO)	Candidate refers to a relationship between instructional leadership and teacher outcomes.	"[Teachers] think they're doing everything they can and beyond, where it's like, you're just trying to steer them in the right direction, or let them see out a different window."	Original
Process of Becoming a Leader	Gaining Confidence (BL - C)	Candidate describes growing confidence on the path to becoming a leader.	"I'm much more confident in my abilities, probably from everything I have learned."	March 6
	Changing Behavior (BL - CB)	Candidate describes a change in behavior on the path to becoming a leader.	"Instead of just being a teacher who... accepts the way that it is, I feel like I now have the ability to look at an issue that we're having within the school and come up with a solid plan to try and fix it."	March 12
	Experiencing Difficulty (BL - D)	Candidate describes the process of becoming a leader as difficult or uncomfortable.	"Everyone probably thinks leading is a lot easier until they actually do it."	March 6
	Experiencing or Overcoming Fear (BL - F)	Candidate describes feeling afraid during the process of becoming a leader <i>or</i>	"I was really worried about coming to [my administrators] with this because, you know, saying 'We're doing [this system] all wrong...'	March 6

	- F)	describes how they are working to overcome fear.	that's pretty brave to go in there and say that."	
	Practicing Influence (BL - I)	Candidate describes the importance of practicing influence.	"Finding a way to get everyone... involved and on board, and... [taking] ownership in what's best for [students]."	May 21
	Increasing Knowledge (BL - K)	Candidate describes gaining more functional knowledge on the path to becoming a leader.	"It's almost like a principal has to be an expert in every single classroom, in every single field, in order to be able to be an instructional leader."	March 13
	Building or Managing Relationships (BL - MR)	Candidate describes changing their approach to relationships with others when becoming a leader.	"Somehow got to find a way to... push teamwork. We're all... one team."	May 21
	General Reflection (BL - R)	Candidate describes practicing reflection on the path to becoming a leader.	"I'll definitely learn from my mistakes." "I'm coming up with my own thinking and I'm not letting somebody tell me their point of view."	March 6
Future as a Principal	Future as a Principal - Confident (FC)	Candidate speaks about future as an instructional leader with confidence.	"I would definitely feel even more confident in leading [a similar project in the future] because... I'm a learn-from-experience kind of person."	Original
	Future as a Principal - Hesitant (FH)	Candidate speaks about future as an instructional leader with hesitance.	"I didn't want to be a principal at first... I still actually am not sure that I want to, but... because I just didn't want to lose the relationship with the kids."	Original
Previous Experience as a Teacher or Leader	Previous Experience as a Leader (EL)	Candidate refers to prior leadership experience.	"I was an [instructional leader] for [#] years."	March 13
	Previous Experience as a Teacher (ET)	Candidate refers to prior teaching experience or content expertise.	"It reminds me of teaching in general... my very, very first teaching job, where I think back and I'm like, 'Wow, I did a lot of stupid stuff.'"	Original
Relationship with Mentoring Leader	Onsite Mentorship - Negative (OmNeg)	Candidate describes a negative relationship with mentoring leader at practicum site	"I think what makes the practicum hard is... I personally feel like I had a bad administrator as my mentor."	Original
	Onsite Mentorship - Neutral (OmNeu)	Candidate refers to a relationship with a mentoring leader at practicum site, describes neither positively or negatively.	"I sat down with my principal to develop this."	Original
	Onsite Mentorship - Positive (OmPos)	Candidate describes a positive relationship with mentoring leader at practicum site.	"My [administrators] have been super supportive. And they were supportive of this project as well."	Original

Relationships with Teachers	Relationships with Teachers - Changing (ReIT - Ch)	Candidate describes how their relationship with the teaching staff is changing or has changed.	“What I like about these projects is that you kind of have, it's kind of like a test run where, especially working with these other teachers that we've been working with, it's, you're still seen as a peer to them.”	Original
	Relationships with Teachers - Credibility (ReIT - Cr)	Candidate describes the role of credibility in relationships with teachers.	“The first thing that's going to happen when I... if I decide to be an assistant principal or a principal some place, is that [content area] teacher is going to be like, ‘Oh, you don't know what you're talking about. You're a [different content area] teacher.’”	Original
	Relationships with Teachers - Manager (ReIT - Mg)	Candidate describes or anticipates taking on teacher management responsibilities.	“I had a hard time getting the data from the [other] teachers. And I teach [#] grade, so I know the [#] grade teacher very well.”	Original
	Relationships with Teachers - Trust (ReIT - Tr)	Candidate describes the role of trust in relationships with teachers.	“Being able to have some strategies on how to build trust with my teachers so that when I do get that job, I know, how do I approach this that will earn a level of mutual respect immediately or quickly enough, so that I can actually make a difference in that position.”	Original
	Relationships with Teachers - Concern (ReIT - Con)	Candidate describes potential negative social impact of conducting the practicum project.	“I didn't want people to know [about the project], because I didn't want them to [treat me differently.]”	March 15

