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## Using Equity Audits to Create a Support System for Marginalized Students

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## **Introduction**

Successful leaders in schools are challenged with creating structures that promote student engagement in their own school community (Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012). The educational system in the United States is intended to create a basic knowledge base and it only seems logical that students should be given a support system that allows them to be successful in today's diverse educational systems. This is particularly interesting with the recent enrollment changes in the Texas school system. In the last few years, Texas has seen the English Language Learner (ELL) enrollment increase from 15.5% in 2005 to 18.1% in 2015.

Another student population needing strong leaders is special education (SPED) which represent 8.6% of the total 5.3 million Texas public school students in 2015 (Texas Education Agency Enrollment Report, Page 25). Developing a sense of community and a belief that individual opinions and voice have impact is important for success for "student voice can serve as a catalyst for positive changes in schools" (as noted by Mitra et al. 2012, p. 104). Creating an atmosphere of support and developing instructional leaders who embrace the importance of student voice and community is one way our university and school districts are partnering to create support systems that provide long term systematic improvements leading to a more democratic and socially just educational system.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how a principal preparation program uses equity audits, actions plans, and self-reflections from the preparation of aspiring principals in the principal fellows program to support the learning and engagement of all

students, with an emphasis on supporting ELLs and SPED students. In addition, this study discusses how the principal preparation program provides an avenue of advocacy and support for all students while specifically addressing ELLs and SPED students.

The principal fellow program is a university and district partnership to prepare aspiring principals through an in-depth, job-embedded 15-month residency program with the financial support of a non-profit organization. During the 15-month job-embedded fellow residency program, the fellows (i.e., principal interns) are provided a just-in time curriculum that aligns with national and state standards, and all nine competencies outlined by the Texas Principal Certification Exam. The framework for the just-in time curriculum is based on six areas: data driven decision making, culture and equity access, instructional leadership, communication systems, school and district systems, and human capital development. Within this framework, the principal fellows conduct an equity audit of their campus using current school and district state data to define the problem(s) of practice (e.g., discipline inequities) that may exist.

The equity audit is a foundational piece of the learning experiences for each principal to identify and create action steps to address the areas of need and any inequities that are revealed (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004; Furman, 2012). After conducting the equity analysis, the principal fellow conducts a root cause analysis for each problem of practice, develops S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely) annual goals, quarterly goals, and intervention strategies that enables them to continuously monitor the progress of each problem of practice using the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). The TAIS plan “is designed to establish the foundational systems, actions, and processes to support the continuous improvement of

Texas school districts and campuses” (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). Through the equity audit findings, each principal fellow is provided the opportunity to select and support five areas of need that are identified as problems of practice including: (1) a low-performing content area, (2) two low-performing teachers, (3) a highly-at-risk ELL student, and (4) a highly-at-risk SPED student that are continuously monitored using the TAIS process and data tracking as a means of leading improvement of student outcomes for each of the five areas of need.

Principal fellows lead the improvement of student outcomes within the five identified areas of need through collaborative teaching and learning through the Professional Learning Community (PLC), teacher Pre-conference, Observation, Post-conference (POP), and the TAIS process. The POP includes four pre-conferences, four observations, and four post-conferences (i.e., four POP cycles) for the two pre-selected teachers of need chosen in collaboration with the mentor principal. In addition to progress monitoring, the principal fellows learn how to advocate for an ELL and a SPED student populations by integrating culture and equity access for highly at-risk students.

### **Literature Review**

This section is a presentation of literature related to examining the elements of special population groups, specifically, with ELLs and SPED students. The literature reviewed includes past and current federal policy, state policy, accountability standards, previous research studies, current books, and journal articles. This section highlights current ELL and SPED educational policy in relationship to the three domains within the A-F Accountability System established by the Texas Education Agency, Social Justice

Theory, Leadership Theory that include implications for further research, the role of university-district partnerships with principal preparation, and equity audit studies.

### **Policy**

On December 10, 2015, during the previous presidential term, former President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law. This law reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and was a response to the unworkable challenges within the No Child Left Behind Act enacted in 2002 (ed.gov). The Department of Education highlights key provisions of the ESSA including two significant points for this study (ed.gov):

1. Advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students.
2. Maintains an expectation that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress.

Included at the federal level, Special Education Programs are governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The purpose of IDEA is “to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education” (Center for Parent Information and Resources, n.d.).

As for the policy at the next level, (i.e., state level), Texas school districts and the educators in the school districts are provided with guidelines and requirements stated by the Texas Education Code (TEC) and the Texas Administrative Code (TAC). The Texas Administrative Code compiles all the rules for the state's agencies including the Texas Education Agency. In reference to ELLs, Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 89 of the TAC, a portion of this statute states:

(a) It is the policy of the state that every student in the state who has a home language other than English and who is identified as an English language learner shall be provided a full opportunity to participate in a bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) program, as required in the Texas Education Code (TEC), Chapter 29, Subchapter B.

The Texas Educational Agency not only provides the sources listed above, but also provides additional information and resources to support the needs of English Language Learners and Special Education students. The agency creates and houses the accountability requirements and resources used by schools.

The current accountability system used in Texas, and currently up for revision, is called the A-F accountability system. The A-F system rates the performance of three domains using letter grades for each campus and district. The three domains include: Student Achievement, School Progress (Academic Growth & Performance), and Closing the Gaps. Within each of the domains, the special education population and the English language learner performance included in this study contribute and have an insurmountable impact on the overall rating earned by each campus and school district.

### **Social Justice Leadership**

The ideology of serving students of special population groups with all the guidelines and requirements set-forth by the federal government, the state government and state agency may be overwhelming to schools and educators; however, it is vital that all regulations and policies be upheld to accommodate the students' best interest. With this in mind, challenges mentioned by the provisions of the ESSA, such as inequities and low-performing schools prompts an awareness that educational leaders must first

understand and be able to identify and restore social equity, or theoretically known as social justice.

Theoharis (2007) posed three research questions to further develop the understanding of social justice theory and to enhance administrators' practice in the field. He wanted to know how principals in schools were enacting social justice, the resistance the principals encountered, and the strategies developed and used to overcome barriers. His autoethnography study which included an ethnography of seven other principals serving urban schools in the Midwest provided findings through analyzing data from several sources such as in-depth interviews and data collection from his own experience.

In regard to his first research question, Theoharis (2007) found that the principals, “possess a remarkable commitment to equity and justice” and enacted their own resistance by “(a) raising student achievement, (b) improving school structures, (c) re-centering and enhancing staff capacity, and (d) strengthening school culture and community” (p. 231). Theoharis (2007) study proved that principals could overcome barriers by first understanding social justice theory including all the terms associated with social justice: “equity, equality, inequality, equal opportunity, affirmative action, and most recently diversity” (Blackmore, 2009, p. 7). Second, the principals did enhance their practice in the field. For example, the principals felt that job demands of the principalship such as, long hours, influenced the time and effort needed to be spent on restoring social justice. One example the principals used to cope with resistance was physical activity.

In another study focusing on social justice theory, Furman (2012) contributes to previous social justice frameworks by providing a conceptualization framework using a

praxis approach (i.e., reflection and action) for social justice leadership that preparation programs for leaders in K-12 schools can use as a framework. Furman (2012) implied that there is limited research on practice of social justice within schools and suggest that preparations programs utilize equity audits assist in identify and address any inequities found. The principals in the Theoharis (2007) study felt the preparation programs did not prepare them to lead social justice and that the preparation programs need to prepare principals to face any barriers in addressing social justice issues. In addition, the principal preparation programs need to provide explicit equity driven, social justice learning opportunities for students in the program.

### **Principal Preparation Programs**

Principals need to identify and address the needs of all students including the needs of special education students and English language learners. However, there are several issues that limit schools from addressing students' needs properly. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) suggest there is a shortage of certified school administrators; therefore, uncertified and unqualified personnel are being hired by school districts. Another issue is the lack of adequate preparation principal preparation programs.

The Southern Regional Education Board (2005) reported on the disconnect between the actual work that principals do in a real-world setting and the preparation that universities provide to aspiring principals. Some of the items included in the report (Leadership Matters, November/December 2005):

- Preparing school reform leaders is not a high priority
- Many aspiring principals are under-supported during their internship experiences
- Principal preparation is out of sync with accountability demands.



However, current research identifies principal preparation programs that are addressing the bullets above as well as others. The principal preparation programs that the researchers identified are also preparation programs that are offered through a university-district partnership.

In 2015, the Wallace Foundation provided a report on improving university principal preparation programs. The purpose of this report was to collect and analyze previous literature reviews, surveys, and interviews to add to the body of knowledge on strengths and weaknesses of principal preparation programs. Through the in-depth data collection and analysis, Wallace (2015) reported that districts are, for the most part, dissatisfied with how universities prepare aspiring principals, how university-district partnerships play a key role in developing high-quality principals, the disconnect from what principals do and what they are taught, the implication of barriers from university policies, and that at the state level there are a lack of roles to improve principal preparation programs.

The logistics for principal preparation programs through university and district partnerships are important. The logistics referred to include the vetting process for the preparation programs, the length of the program, meeting times, what will be taught, who will mentor and supervise the principal intern, and development of partnerships between university and school district (Teachers 21, n.d.; Sandhills Leadership Academy, n.d.; University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016 & NewLeaders, n.d.). When it comes strictly to addressing the curriculum, there needs to be a balanced approach that includes instructional leadership, school improvement, family and community relations, management, and organizational culture (Winn, et al., 2016).

## **Equity**

Research studies reveal that there is a lack of equity with minority students in schools. Valenzuela, Copeland, Huaqing Qi, & Park (2006) found there is a disproportionate representation of minority students including English language learners are being placed in special education and suggest that “minority and ELL students have restricted access to general education” (p. 437). In examining the placement of English language learners in special education, Sullivan (2011) indicated that ELL students are more likely to have a learning disability label opposed to the white students. Furthermore, there is a disproportionate representation of African American students in special education (Blanchet, 2006) and an inequity with African American students receiving disciplinary consequences (Hilbreth & Slate, 2012). With the notion that a lack of equity exists with minority students, school leaders must identify ways to identify and address the equity issue.

One way to identify the lack of equity in schools is through the lens of equity audits. Skrla et al. (2004) recommended, “educators in schools and districts start using equity audits to increase equity within our systems. We also recommend that professors in leadership preparation programs teach their students about this tool and ways to use it” (p. 155). Skrla et al. (2004) examined previous research on equity audits and re-conceptualized the equity audit into three main areas: teacher quality, educational programs, and student achievement. Some examples of the equity audit components include teacher certifications, student and teacher demographics, discipline data, and

ACT/SAT student achievement. In addition, their findings indicated that teacher quality plus programmatic equity equals achievement equity. To the recommendation given from the authors, professors/instructors need to know what an equity audit is and what the components are within it.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research study is grounded in the theory of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL). The work of Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) was a focus due to the connections between this work and the stated purpose of the study; to demonstrate how a principal preparation program leverages equity-driven data to support learning. Culturally responsive leadership evolved from culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and encompasses leadership philosophies such as culturally relevant leadership and leadership for diversity. Additionally, culturally responsive leadership often intersects with the ideals of social justice leadership. These leadership philosophies have in common the aspects of ethic of care, focus on student achievement especially for historically marginalized student populations, focus on culture of all stakeholders, actions to combat deficit thinking within the organization, and setting in motion systems that are inclusive and that promote diversity.

The three research questions formulated for this study encompass an overall focus on training future principals in the use of equity data for the express purpose of tracking and growing students with an emphasis on traditionally marginalized populations. Several connections between these research questions and components of the four quadrants of the *Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework* (Khalifa et al, 2016) provided a strong foundation for this study.

The four quadrants of the *Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework* (Khalifa et al, 2016) are (1) critically self-reflects on leadership behaviors, (2) develops culturally responsive teachers, (3) promotes culturally responsive/inclusive school environment, and (4) engages students, parents, and indigenous contexts. The components of these quadrants most highly utilized in this study are:

Quadrant 1:

- Uses school data and indicants to measure CRSL
- Using equity audits to measure student inclusiveness, policy, and practice

Quadrant 2:

- Using school data to see cultural gaps in achievement, discipline, enrichment, and remedial services

Quadrant 3:

- Uses student voice
- Using school data to discover and track disparities in academic and disciplinary trends

Quadrant 4:

- Resists deficit images of students and families
- Connecting directly with students

The future principals are immersed in CRSL activities and thought as a foundation of their learning. Following is a description of the research to determine the effectiveness in regard to the use of equity driven data analysis and marginalized populations.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guide this study.

- 1) What needs did the principal fellow identify using the equity audit?
- 2) What impact did the principal fellows have on English language learners and special education students using the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) instrument?
- 3) In what ways did the principal preparation residency program prepare aspiring school leaders to advocate and support students', engagement and learning?

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this study was through the lens of qualitative content analysis examining student artifacts of 13 principal fellows that participated in a 15-month job-embedded residency program. In this study, the researchers wanted to examine student artifacts from the work conducted by the principal interns over the 15-month program to understand how the principal interns were supporting marginalized student groups. The three data sources examined included equity audits, Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) plans, and self-reflection surveys. The equity audits provided specific demographic equity-data for the first two areas: teacher quality, programmatic equity, and student achievement (Skrla et al., 2004).

A qualitative content analysis is considered a research approach to subjectively interpret data (Schreier, 2012; Krippendorff, 2018). Over a half a century ago, content analysis was first introduced in a quantitative research approach objectively examining quantifiable descriptions of the manifest content of communication of written or oral materials (Berelson, 1952). However, Kracauer (1952) argued for content analysis research to be conducted in a qualitative approach. This study used a qualitative content

analysis looking at quantitative and qualitative data from the equity audits, TAIS plans, and self-reflection surveys to describe the impact principal fellows were having on English language learners and special education students.

### **Setting**

The principal fellow program included thirteen participants spanning across Texas serving thirteen campuses and five school districts. The campuses are divided into both rural and urban school settings that include: three high schools, two middle schools, and eight elementary schools. Combining all thirteen campuses, the principal fellows serve approximately 11,123 students and 1,251 teachers.

The principal fellows, participants in the study, are accepted through a systematic selection process involving district recommendation and university review. The partnership with each school district was established and each district vetted potential principal fellows. Once vetted by the school district, the applications were sent to the university for further review. The selection review at the university level included all candidates from the five school districts. The application through the graduate school admissions process included a letter of interest, one letter of recommendation from the supervising principal, two letters of recommendations of their choice, graduate school application, and resume. Additionally, each candidate was required to take the Haberman Star Administrator Questionnaire. During the final stage, the faculty committee interviewed each of the candidates. Once all the interviews were conducted, the candidates were ranked, sorted, and selected to participate in the principal fellow program.

In conclusion, the principal fellows were highly vetted between the district and university. The fellows then began their journey completing a 15-month job-embedded principal preparation residency program. Some of the foundational tasks they completed were equity audits, TAIS plans, and self-reflections on their experience serving as a principal fellow.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After the 15-month job-embedded principal fellow residency program was completed, the three student artifacts were analyzed to identify common themes. The researchers used an open-coding data analysis approach to sort data into themes. Specifically, the researchers took data from the equity audits to provide examples of inequities found and used data from the TAIS plan to create bar graphs representing the impact the fellows had on English language learners and special education students. Additionally, the university researchers also used an open-coding approach to identify common themes from the self-reflection surveys.

### **Findings**

The findings from the study were divided into three sections corresponding to the three research questions. For the first research question, the principal fellows dissected their campus data and reported the findings to their mentor principal and peers. The researchers analyzed all the equity audits to report findings within the categories of teacher quality and programmatic equity (Skrla et al., 2004). The student achievement data were reported through a different process other than the equity audit. The findings from the teacher quality category indicated an imbalance of the teacher ethnicity compared to student ethnicity. For example, one principal fellow reported 33.7% of the

teachers were Hispanic compared to the 69.9% of the students. The same equity audit reported 85% of the teachers were female and the other 15% were males. The researchers concluded that the imbalance between teacher and student ethnicity was common for most of the equity audits. The researchers also concluded that the elementary schools reflected the same imbalance of more female teachers than male teachers. As for the total years of teaching experience, all the equity audits combined report 42.3% for teachers with (1-5) years teaching experience.

The programmatic equity included the representation of special population groups including gifted and talented, special education, and English language learners. The findings indicated there were inequities of representation between the special education population and the gifted and talented population. All principal fellows reported a 10% or greater inequity difference between the percentage of each minority group of the total population and the identification of G/T and SPED students. Looking at the student discipline data, five of the principal fellow's findings revealed inequity differences of 10% or more with African American students. For example, African Americans were 19.6% of the total student population, yet they had 41% of the total discipline referrals.

The findings for the second research question address quarterly goals, interventions, strategies used, and the progress. This process was conducted and tracked using the TAIS template provided by the Texas Education Agency. Each principal fellow identified and supported an English language learner and special education student throughout the school year. All the quarterly goals were stated differently to meet the individual needs of the students. For example, the difference of goals statements included some of the following: promoting good behavior, improving attendance, and/or



improving student achievement. Progress indicators in the TAIS plan were identified for each quarterly goal by the principal fellow. For instance, the progress monitor question asked, “Did you meet this quarter’s goal?”, and the responses were marked either as: “yes; no, but made significant progress; no, but made some progress; no” (Texas Accountability Intervention System template, n.d.). The TAIS reporting was fully implemented during the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter. The results for the special education students showed that there was overall progress from the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter to the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter (see Figure 1). Four students did not make progress in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter; however, only one student did not make progress in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter. Both the indicators of “no but made significant progress” and “yes” both increased by one student from the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter to the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter.

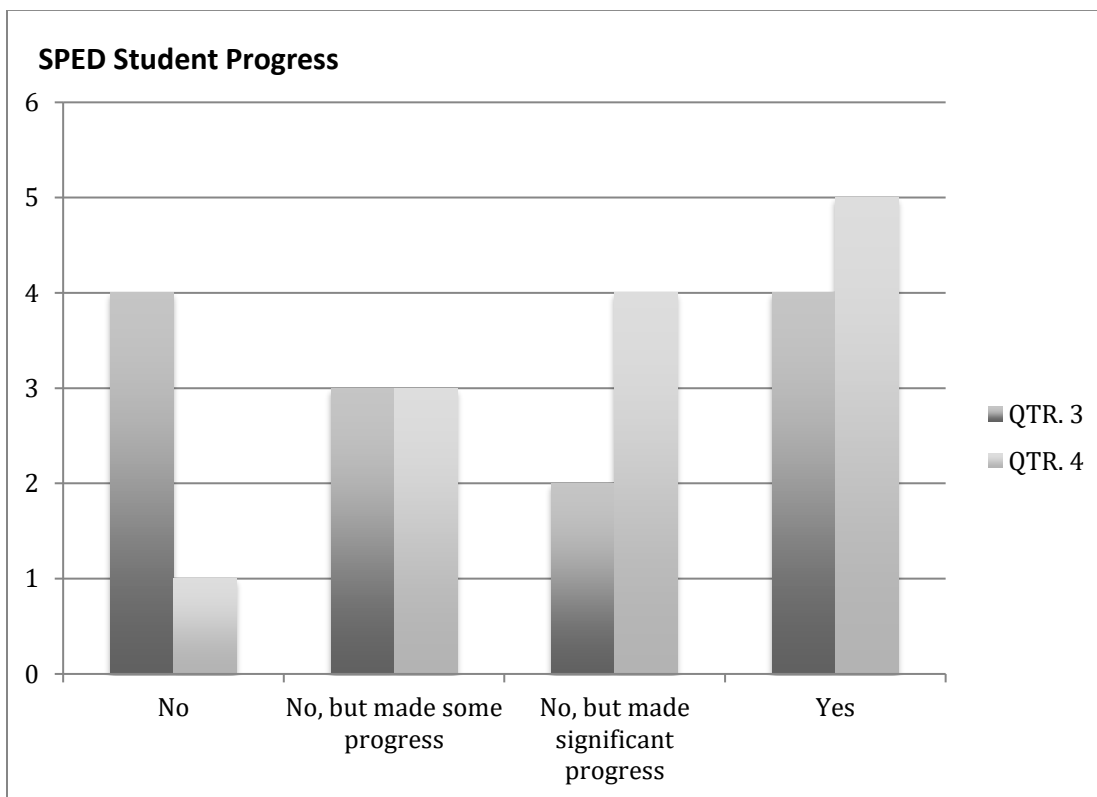


Figure 1. 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter results for special education student progress.

The results of the English language learner reflected similar results (see Figure 2).

For the English language learner report, there was a decrease in the “no” indicator, and an increase in the “no, but made significant progress” and an increase in “no, but made some progress”. The “yes” indicator remained almost equal with seven “yes” indicators in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter and six “yes” indicators in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter.

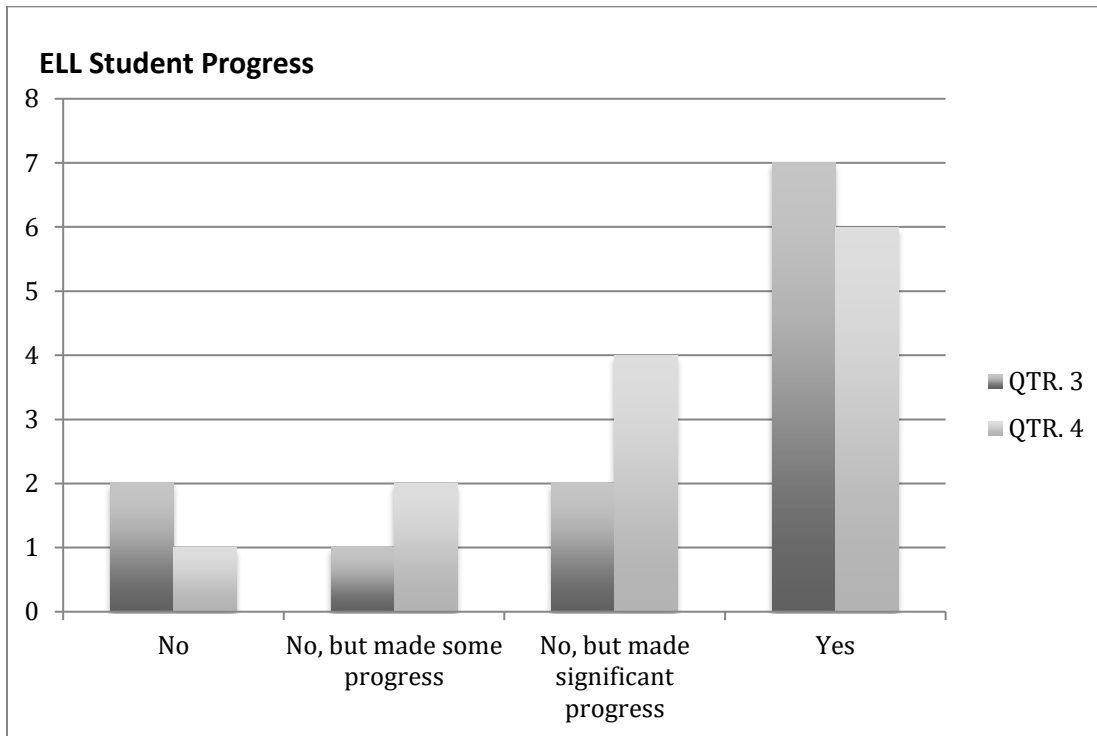


Figure 2. 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter results for English language learner student progress.

The findings from the third research question addressed ways the preparation program provides an avenue of advocacy and support for students, engagement and learning. First, the researchers needed to understand the impact of the aspiring principal (i.e., principal fellow). In this reference, the principal fellows completed a self-reflection survey at the end of each six weeks and rated themselves on overall experience related to specific standards/competency. Table 1 below represents the common themes of tasks and self-reflection analysis for the 2<sup>nd</sup> six weeks reporting period.

Table 1

*Self-Reflection from Competency 003*

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National STANDARD 2: Ethics and Professional Norms  
 TEC Code of Ethics  
 T-PESS Standard 3: Executive Leadership  
 TExES (068) Principal Certification Domain I: School Community Leadership

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Competency 003 – The principal knows how to act with integrity, fairness, and in ethical and legal manner.

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Extremely professional	Moderately professional	Slightly professional	Neither	Slightly unprofessional	Moderately unprofessional	Extreme unprofessional
62%	38%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Common Themes:

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Shadowing principal in conferences with parents and teachers  
 Participate/shadow in discipline  
 Member in decision making process – ARD/504/LPAC

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There were three common themes that emerged from the principal fellows gaining opportunities to learn how to act in an ethical and professional manner. In this reference, principal fellows monitored the procedures and processes of student’s rights, specifically English language learners and special education students. In addition, principal fellows monitored the proper implementation of accommodations that were determined in the special education student’s Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meeting. Principal fellows also learned the Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) process for English language learner.

**Discussion**

Producing school leaders who are job-ready and have the skills to improve instruction through equity lenses with teachers and students is at the heart of the principal fellow’s residency program and this study. The principal fellows conducted a thorough equity audit and identified areas of inequities to address during the upcoming school year.

The fellows used the findings from the equity audit to specifically identify and address the needs of special education students and English language learners.

The study concludes with recommendations for preparation programs to center the voices and experiences of the job-embedded learners, the aspiring principals, teachers and students. The first recommendation is to conduct a detailed equity audit. It is vital leaders of the school (i.e., their campus) analyze data within their programs, teachers, and student achievement (Skrla et al., 2004). The second recommendation is twofold: (1) all stakeholders, specifically, principals and teachers should know and understand all federal and state regulations that support special population areas (i.e., English language learners and special education students). (2) After establishing a clear understanding of regulations, it is important that stakeholders support and advocate for all ELL students and special education students by implementing any changes emerging from the equity audit. Third, principals must know all their students needs so they can implement the most appropriate practices and support systems.

It is evident that the principals serving in the job-embedded principal preparation program were able to conduct equity audits, develop action plans, self-reflect on their experiences that did link to Khalifa et al. (2016) CRSL quadrants. Therefore, we recommend that principal preparation programs use equity audits to drive action steps to support all students. It is also critical that the role today's educational leaders produce a culturally responsive school environment.

The researchers further conclude principals should continuously analyze and progress monitor teachers and student data in effort to lead school improvement. In this study, the Texas Accountability Intervention System plan was utilized to progress

monitor content area(s), teachers, and students. The findings revealed that creating annual goals, quarterly goals, intervention strategies, and monitoring steps did indeed build human capital, improve instructional strategies, and improve student achievement. Lastly, the learning the principal fellows experienced through the job-embedded residency program provided equitable solutions for targeted ELL and SPED students.

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