

Leading Equitable Teaching and Learning: Principal Lessons Learned About Instructional Clarity and Coherence

Brad Kose

Introduction

Scholarship demonstrates that effective school principals are more than managers; they are leaders of learning. Principals impact student learning outcomes through practices such as increasing staff capacity, building school culture, developing professional learning communities, and strategic resource management, with a predominant focus on instructional leadership to improve teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Marzano et al., 2005). An important leadership strategy in this endeavor centers on building instructional coherence, which is associated with improved teaching (Cobb et al., 2020; Polikoff et al., 2020) and student achievement (Moon et al., 2021; Newmann et al., 2001).

Although there are compelling theories for leaders' roles in building coherence (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), the empirical evidence examining the school principal's roles and challenges in building coherence is limited. In addition, it is often unclear how leadership strategies or challenges in building coherence may change when the end goal is educational equality (for all students), and the primary leadership focus is supporting excellent and equitable teaching and learning.

As scholars in leading for equity have argued, traditional and technical approaches to instructional leadership tend to overlook the role of educational leaders in perpetuating, understanding, or addressing pervasive educational inequities, particularly for traditionally marginalized students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2021; Shields, 2020). However, although the literature in leadership for equity has grown substantially over the past few decades, research "in this area of study is still in infancy... and has yet to... establish a strong empirical knowledge base" (Gümüş et al., 2021, p. 15). Thus, similar to scholarship in leading for learning, the relevance and nuances of school principal experiences and practices in creating equitable instructional coherence are less understood.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to examine important lessons I learned about instructional coherence as an elementary principal in striving to lead for equitable teaching and learning from 2016-2021, and the challenges I faced along the way. In other words, the aim is to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between leading for equity and leading for instructional coherence. To focus this examination, I select areas that I found most salient in influencing equitable teaching and learning in literacy. Specifically, this article is guided by two questions:

1. What leadership lessons did I learn about the relationship between instructional coherence and equitable teaching and learning?
2. What leadership practices and challenges were most salient in this endeavor?

Theoretical Framework

Instructional coherence can be understood through two interrelated dimensions. The first dimension concerns instructional *alignment*, which includes the alignment of standards, curriculum, assessments, and instruction within a subject area. It also encompasses horizontal alignment within a team or grade level and vertical alignment across grade levels. This instructional coherence supports student learning through intentionally designed and sequenced learning opportunities (e.g., Heineke & McTighe, 2018). Additionally, various aspects of instructional coherence are often integral within collaborative teamwork or professional learning communities (PLCs). For example, examining common assessment results is essential to PLC work (Donohoo & Hite, 2021; DuFour et al., 2021).

The second dimension of coherence involves the degree to which staff have *shared meaning and collective practices* versus isolated, fragmented, or inconsistent understandings and practices (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Stated differently, having instructional alignment with electronic and paper materials is one thing; having collective understanding and shared practices toward a common goal is another.

Research demonstrates that both dimensions are important. For example, instructional program coherence—where programs and practices were guided by a common framework for curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional learning—has been associated with improved teaching (Cobb et al., 2020; Polikoff et al., 2020) as well as gains in student achievement (Moon et al., 2021; Newmann et al., 2001). Thus, there is a strong case for school principals to build instructional coherence across the school.

However, if principals approach coherence building with technically “neutral” strategies, they may perpetuate educational inequalities because the complex needs of diverse students and associated systemic barriers may not be recognized or addressed (Kose, 2007, 2009; Childress et al., 2009; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Olivia, 2010; Shields, 2020; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2021). Leaders for equity promote at least three aspects of equitable teaching and learning: (a) diversity awareness and cultural competence that include confronting deficit thinking, low expectations, or culturally incongruent practices (Hammond, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017); (b) creating inclusive learning partnerships and environments (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009); and, (c) engaging students in academically rigorous and culturally responsive teaching and learning (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Heineke & McTighe, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Leaders influence more equitable teaching and schooling practices through professional learning (Kose, 2007, 2009), inclusive practices and multi-tiered systems of support (Frattura & Capper, 2007; McCart & Miller, 2020), and building equity-centered teams, structures, and systems (Kose, 2025; Childress et al., 2009; Radd et al., 2021; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2021).

Methods

I explored and examined several data sources for this article. These included journal entries I made during my time as a principal that typically involved a few paragraphs to a page of reflections two to three times a month (almost always on weekends). During my third year as a

principal, I began to organize my reflections on the principalship into broader categories, partly with an intention of future publications. I eventually created different sections and jotted down rows and rows of bullet point paragraph reflections and insights while they were still fresh in my mind. In this article, I focused on data from the section on instructional coherence. Another important data source for this article includes various documents I used or created as a principal including my entry plan, school instructional guidelines, district guidelines, and staff meeting agendas and materials.

By using qualitative and autoethnography methods of data collection, analysis, reflexivity, and systematic introspection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020; Poulos, 2021), I analyzed these primary source documents to gain a deeper understanding of relevant principal practices and challenges. I used writing as a primary method of inquiry to explore and analyze these memories, challenges, and practices aimed at building school-wide coherence for equitable teaching and learning.

As with any research, the methods of this study have strengths and limitations. A strength of this approach is uncovering a deeper understanding of leadership practices. The most obvious limitation is that it is the perspective of one principal within one school, and some practices may not apply or generalize to other leadership contexts.

Findings: Principal Insights

In this section, I share powerful insights about leading for equitable instructional coherence in literacy. I start by sharing relevant context then delve into the qualitative relationship between instructional coherence and equitable teaching and learning. Finally, I offer relevant leadership practices and challenges.

Context. My pathway to becoming a principal was nontraditional. After teaching elementary school, I pursued doctoral studies that eventually focused on educational leadership. After five years as an assistant professor in educational leadership with a focus on equitable principal leadership of professional learning, I returned to K-12 as a director of professional development. After five years in this role, I delved into school leadership within the same mid-sized, urban district. Thus, when I began my tenure as a principal, I brought extensive leadership knowledge, had established significant relationships with fellow principals and central office leaders, and knew how to navigate a complex and dynamic district environment.

I faced a number of contextual challenges relevant to equity and coherence as a new principal of a Title I elementary school whose population was about 50% students of color. First, prior to my arrival, my school's K-5 literacy benchmark data demonstrated persistent and sizable literacy achievement gaps and flat-lined proficiency performance. For example, for a K-2 reading foundational benchmark assessment intended to identify students needing reading intervention (considered a low bar), only 62% of students passed it, with 45% of Black students meeting. Our 3rd-5th grade MAP reading benchmark data hovered around 35% meeting, with about 10% of Black students reaching proficiency targets. Second, the district had promoted, used, and offered various instructional frameworks and associated professional learning across many years. For example, our teaching evaluation framework, guiding instructional framework, culturally responsive frameworks, lesson-planning frameworks, and walk-through frameworks were often

different. In addition, the district had a history of developing or adopting various curricular programs that had even greater variation with school implementation and ownership. Some were standards aligned; some were not.

The Relationship Between Instructional Coherence and Equitable Teaching and Learning.

In my first year as a principal, based on my entry plan with considerable staff input, review of lesson and unit plans, and observations of team meetings and teaching, I discovered a culture of caring, commitment, and teacher autonomy. Virtually all teachers wanted students to learn and succeed. There was a general spirit of these are “our” kids instead of “my” or “your” kids. Teachers demonstrated many instructional strengths. Teachers displayed a wide variety of teaching practices, teaming practices, and selection and use of literacy curriculum materials with good intentions about teaching students.

However, my school had a wide range of (a) beliefs about the meaning of equity, (b) diversity awareness and cultural competence, (c) expertise in developing positive relationships and inclusive learning environments, and (d) expertise in rigorous, equitable teaching and learning.

The meaning of equity varied depending on which social identity was emphasized or not—race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, language, etc. For example, some teachers focused more on support for low-income students, some advocated primarily for students with disabilities, while others emphasized the needs of bilingual or Black students. The meaning of equitable practices also varied, ranging from representative curricular resources to creating inclusive environments, to building positive relationships with traditionally marginalized students and families, to closing academic achievement gaps with standards-based practices, and to engaging students in holistic learning, including social-emotional learning.

Teachers’ ideas about equity were often related to their diversity awareness as well as expertise in creating inclusive environments and equitable teaching and learning. Some teachers had strong relationships with students of color, while some did not. Some had positive relationships with students of color but held low expectations. Some teachers had strong academic teaching and learning skills, while some did not. Some were strong in all areas.

In addition, there was a wide range of beliefs and practices regarding the value and use of district literacy resources. Some teachers viewed these resources as quality while others questioned their engagement level, cultural relevance, or standards alignment. Some teachers used district resources; some did not. Some teachers used literacy materials they developed over decades. Some used the district recommended program. Some teachers used curricula and formative assessments they had developed over many years. Others used a combination. Some teachers planned together; some did not.

Likewise, the quality of student literacy learning opportunities and outcomes varied tremendously. Students not only engaged in a different kinds of content and instruction, they sometimes received little to no instruction in a particular literacy area, including reading foundational skills. Some teachers did not systematically teach reading foundation skills, but rather, they “integrated” this learning into small group work. As noted previously, the one area of consistency was five years of standardized literacy benchmark assessment data for grades K–2

and 3–5. In short, there was little equity or instructional coherence across the school. This incoherence was partly due to the district context and partly due to previously unclear and inconsistent school expectations, supports, and accountability.

The direct relationship between *incoherence* and teaching was not clear because both equitable and inequitable teaching existed on teams with instructional incoherence. For example, grade-level teams sometimes had excellent teachers as well as low-performing teachers who were placed on improvement plans. Thus, teaching quality was not necessarily caused by instructional incoherence. However, instructional incoherence negatively influenced and created barriers to student learning-focused *collaboration*, which is associated with effective instruction (DuFour, 2021). Simply stated, it was difficult for teams to collaboratively focus on improving teaching and learning when philosophies, practices, and instructional materials varied. With little shared understanding or agreement on what or how to plan or teach, team collaboration often resorted to non-instructional planning (e.g., family communication, field trips) rather than systematically focusing on improving teaching and learning for all students.

On the other hand, greater instructional *coherence* seemed to help improve collaboration, teaching practices, and even outcomes. The strongest example of coherence influencing more equitable teaching and learning occurred through two years of using the same reading foundational skills program. This required both dimensions of coherence: alignment and shared meaning and practices. After establishing this shared school improvement priority (on reading foundational skills), teachers collectively engaged in professional learning, collaborative planning, coaching, peer observation, and supervision. Thus, coherence was built at team and school levels. In addition, instructional coherence influenced improved support staff collaboration and instruction. As teams planned and collaborated around common protocols, practices, and curricula, collaboration with language and special education staff also improved, including special education teachers, ESL teachers, and paraprofessionals. In turn, support staff teaching practices improved in quality and consistency.

Our 3rd–5th grade reading benchmark data improved from 35% to 45% over three years and demonstrated one of the highest growth rates in the district. However, while students of color showed substantive *growth*, this growth was not enough to move *proficiency* rates, which remained similar from year to year. Our reading foundational benchmark data improved the most, moving from 62% meeting to 88% meeting within three years. Students of color showed even greater improvement, including Black students who surged from 45% to 86%.

Leadership Practices and Challenges in Creating Coherence. In this section, I share salient leadership practices that helped move teams and the school to greater instructional coherence. I also offer important leadership challenges I faced in this endeavor.

Clarify Instructional Framework Connections. As a principal, it was important for me to help teachers make sense of an array of planning and instructional models the district had adopted, referenced, or used over many years. These included the Danielson Framework, the gradual release or responsibility framework, visible teaching, different versions of culturally responsive teaching, different versions of restorative justice, different models of creating classroom learning environments, different versions of teaching instructional technology, and different equity

models. It was not uncommon to have a new and sometimes nationally respected district keynote speaker or organization introduce their (new) model—that was typically equity-centered—in isolation from past or existing instructional models. Sometimes, a new model would be introduced more than once a year. The alignment and connections between these models were often unclear because the language, components, planning and teaching guides, resources, and/or relationships between them were different. Thus, conceptualizing and applying new models was often difficult.

At the most fundamental level, I found the *gradual release of responsibility* framework (Fisher and Frey, 2021) to be a flexible, noncontroversial framework to promote equitable teaching and to understand other models. The district led principals in learning and leading with this model. Part of my leadership challenge was to help staff understand and use gradual release in planning and instruction vis-a-vis culturally responsive practices as well as the Danielson Framework (2013), which the district used for teacher evaluation.

In terms of equitable instructional *clarity*, the Danielson domains of planning and preparation, classroom environment, and instructional strategies helped provide the “what” or conceptual teaching big buckets, while the gradual release model provided much more of the “how” in planning and teaching. I used these instructional frameworks with staff to shed light on school-wide instructional strengths and growth areas. For example, in literacy instruction, including reading foundational teaching, we discovered that explicit instruction (or Danielson’s component 3A Communicating with Students, or the “focus lesson” in gradual release) was inconsistent across the school, including literacy, which in turn influenced inequitable student learning opportunities. The focus lesson became a school improvement priority the following year, which included making connections to Hammond’s (2015) culturally responsive teaching strategies in building learning partnerships as well as information processing.

Clarify Instructional Expectations and Parameters. At the elementary level, it was easy for teachers to be overwhelmed with teaching all subject areas. Additionally, district curricular expectations, messaging, and resources had accumulated over the years, and new resources were sometimes confusing or late, which created layers of frustration. As a principal, it was important to clarify basic expectations with curricula, instruction, and assessment across subject areas, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening in literacy. My instructional coach and I often spent considerable time planning and then clarifying the *what* and *why* of equitable teaching and learning in staff meetings and team meetings. This clarification set up and was integral to professional learning in *how* to equitably teach and engage in planning cycles of instruction based on student learning performance. These expectations were not only important in building coherent meaning and alignment, they were important in clarifying equitable practice expectations.

Similarly, to move toward more equitable and coherent teaching and learning, it was essential to clarify what one of my superintendents called “flexibility within parameters.” I clarified instructional and team meeting requirements, recommendations, and options through written and oral communication. I found that staff input and adequate lead time, ideally at the beginning of the year, was critical to move toward equitable collective action around these expectations. My message was that every student deserves a quality education, which should not vary from

classroom to classroom. Some parts of education are so important we need to do them consistently across the school. These included district-required instructional blocks of time for subject area content (reading block, reading foundational block, etc.) and using district curricular standards and assessment scope and sequences. One year, I required teacher teams to have common learning targets, formative assessments, and culturally responsive texts, but they had discretion on how they taught them. I messaged, that as professionals, teachers had flexibility in how to teach using our instructional framework. If a team had a better recommendation for a textbook, that was more engaging and relevant for students, I typically approved it.

To summarize these first two sections, clarifying the instructional framework, expectations, and parameters involved the “what” of teaching. This clarity was essential before moving into the “how” of teaching because—as my teachers let me know—it was difficult, if not impossible, to learn and implement instruction that was confusing or unclear.

Create a Collaborative School Improvement Plan. To support shared meaning and practices and the “how” of equitable teaching and learning, it was beneficial to establish our focus for the year, or what Fullan and Quinn (2016) call *focusing direction* in creating coherence. In practical terms, I learned that creating sustained and focused direction occurs best through an annual collaboratively developed school improvement plan and process. This year-long focus ideally was developed with staff input before the year’s end and then adapted to changing needs during the following year. This focus stood in contrast to a top-down approach with little shared ownership. It also stood in contrast to a reactive, fragmented, or unwieldy approach where the “focus” might change month-to-month or overload staff.

To build shared ownership, it was important to collaboratively select school improvement *priority areas* based on disaggregated student data. These priority areas ranged from building strong teams to deepening collective understanding of equity to inclusive practices to enhancing equitable teaching and learning. Again, a strong example of this improvement was the focus on reading foundational skills. Everyone agreed on the goal of improving student reading performance and closing achievement gaps. Although our district’s reading curriculum had flaws, other teacher leaders and I helped persuade the school to work toward quality, consistent practices and use of curricula. These became school improvement priorities as well as evaluative expectations.

An essential component of the school improvement plan was a comprehensive, long-term professional learning plan, which helped create shared understanding and sustained focus and coherence across the year and teams. This professional learning plan started with summer team learning, collaboration, and planning. I found that teachers and teams who used time to deeply understand, review, and/or develop quality long-term unit plans were more likely to focus on quality and coherent weekly and daily planning and teaching. Long-term planning not only fostered coherence and alignment across a grade level, it provided teams with a strong starting point to then create more differentiated (and equitable) plans and supports for different student needs. Likewise, long-term planning fostered greater collaboration with special education and language support staff. If longer-term plans were not already available, understood, or developed, the week-to-week team planning, including collaborative planning with support staff, suffered in coherence and quality.

Similarly, I learned that once the school year started, it was difficult for teachers to find the time and mental space to engage in long-term planning given the demands of teaching and the urgency of planning for the next day or week. Contractually, I could not require teachers to plan during summer, but I provided summer financial and coaching resources, which most teams used. This summer planning was almost entirely funded through discretionary Title funds that other schools in my district did not have. I also provided incentives such as additional planning time during our back to school professional learning days that occurred the week before school started for students.

During the year, I found that designing professional learning around six- to eight-week cycles of learning, practicing, and performance helped build coherence and supported improved practices across the school. The learning phase consisted of whole staff or team foundational learning about a particular practice. In the practicing phase, teachers and teams applied their learning to teaching and sometimes engaged in team or individual coaching. In the performance phase, teams reviewed relevant student learning data to inform their instruction. I also evaluated teachers on relevant performance criteria that was aligned with our school improvement plan and the focus for that learning cycle.

Finally, while a substantial amount of our professional learning content focused on the more technical nature of teaching and learning, I often infused diversity and equity awareness into professional learning, which was aligned with district priorities and learning. Sometimes, the equity focus was simply identifying groups or students who needed more academic supports. Other times, topics included how culture influences learning, awareness of educational inequities, or research-informed practices for teaching racially and linguistically diverse students. This diversity and equity learning was not only important for helping teachers create positive learning environments for all students, it was important in building school-wide coherence and capacity for equitable teaching and learning. Stated differently, professional learning integrated both academic and equity content (Kose, 2007), aligning with scholarly components of equitable teaching such as academic rigor, cultural competence, and diversity awareness (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Discussion

Based on my experiences and reflections, greater instructional coherence not only seemed to influence more equitable teaching and learning, it was a major driver of this improvement. The two dimensions of instructional coherence noted in the theoretical framework—alignment and shared meaning and practices—were both important and mutually reinforcing in supporting more equitable teaching and learning. The alignment of curriculum, instruction, or assessment provided a starting point for establishing the direction, nature, and expectations for equitable teaching and learning, whereas the shared ownership and meaning provided the collective why and commitment to developing, learning, and using shared, equitable practices.

As the school principal, I played a key role in influencing more equitable teaching and learning by promoting greater instructional clarity *and* coherence. A significant amount of this work involved clarifying instructional framework connections, expectations, and parameters due to a

complex, and at times fragmented, district and school context. Providing clarity often preceded and made coherence possible, and clarity and coherence frequently worked together even after the initial bigger picture was painted. These efforts included focusing direction (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), but extended well beyond building long-term vision, priorities, and focus. Thus, it is one thing to clarify instructional guidelines and expectations, but it is another to support sustained coherence and commitment toward it. A key leadership practice in this endeavor involved developing shared ownership and meaning of equitable teaching and learning through comprehensive, collaboratively developed, and continuous school improvement and professional learning.

Thus, in comparison to extant literature, the findings suggest that instructional coherence can play a key role in leading for equity. While Fullan and Quinn (2016) argue that coherence is not structure, alignment, or strategy (although they suggest these can help), I found that alignment and shared meaning were inseparable. Additionally, it was important to infuse equity into instructional coherence to intentionally build equitable instructional coherence by design rather than by default (Heineke & McTighe, 2018). In other words, equitable school improvement often involved integrating leadership for equity with leadership for instructional coherence.

Given the current, polarized political environment, debates, and lawsuits about equity (Kose, 2023; Queen, 2025)—which include banning equity and diversity from texts, teaching, and professional learning (Sawchuk, 2021, 2022; Natanson, 2022)—it is important to note that infusing equity into instructional coherence efforts seemed necessary to improve teaching and learning. While a detailed examination of the impact of equitable instructional coherence on teaching and learning is beyond the scope of this article, the findings suggest that more coherent equitable teaching and learning may support *all* students' improved learning, which affirms research linking coherence and quality teaching (Cobb et al., 2020; Heineke & McTighe, 2018; Polikoff et al., 2020) and is analogous to a rising tide floating all boats.

Finally, the district context, priorities, messaging, resources, and in/coherence influenced my ability to lead as a principal. Many times, the pro-equity messaging and supports were greatly helpful in leading to create greater school-wide equitable instructional coherence. For example, I faced minimal teacher or community resistance from these equity efforts, which could have derailed coherence building. Other times, while the district did not use a top-down approach that might have been met with resistance from schools, the changing smorgasbord of district topics and resources made creating equitable instructional coherence challenging.

Significance and Implications

This study suggests that leadership for equitable instructional coherence may contribute to more equitable teaching and learning. Moreover, this study builds on research demonstrating that the school principal plays a critical role in improving teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2021) and leading for equity (Marshall & Olivia, 2010; Khalifa, 2016; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2021).

Specifically, school leaders might create greater equitable instructional coherence through a variety of strategies, including building shared meaning across diverse beliefs, ideas, and models of equitable teaching and learning. Additionally, school leaders can leverage school

improvement and professional learning to drive coherent change and alignment. These efforts will likely require leadership framing and collaboration strategies that are responsive to the local political context (Kose, 2023).

Another implication is that school leaders build equitable programs that are not only coherent, but also high quality. Coherent efforts and programs that are low quality and/or culturally incongruent will predictably fail to improve equitable teaching and learning.

This article also reinforces research highlighting that principals cannot do this complex work alone. The central office plays a critical role in supporting principal leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2020, 2023; Levin et al., 2020; LoBue, 2023; Mitgang, 2013) and creating instructional program coherence (Cobb et al., 2020; Polikoff et al., 2020). For example, district leaders might reflect on the degree of equitable instructional *coherence* in their contexts versus *fragmented* initiatives, curricula, instructional approaches, or equity efforts that leave the system metaphorically rowing in different directions.

Leadership preparation programs might examine how equitable instructional coherence is integrated into the development of future school and district leaders. Future research could study how leaders in different contexts understand and lead for equitable instructional coherence. Quantitative researchers might examine the relationship between leadership and instructional coherence, teaching, and disaggregated student learning outcomes. In addition, with increasing equity-resistant forces, it is important to understand how leaders adapt to the changing landscape of education to ensure that all students have access to high quality, coherent teaching and learning.

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Dr. Brad Kose (bkose@carrollu.edu) is an associate professor of education at Carroll University. A former teacher, school principal, and director of professional development, his work focuses on transformative approaches to educational leadership and leadership development. Connect with him at [linkedin.com/in/bradkose/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bradkose/).