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## Branches in the Pipeline: Status-Seeking in Principal Licensure Candidates

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## Branches in the Pipeline: Status-Seeking in Principal Licensure Candidates

### Abstract

This paper investigates the reasons and motivations that people pursue administrative licenses. Questions such as who enrolls, why they choose to seek an administrative license, and what are their future goals, are all relevant to address challenges of principal attrition and turnover. With calls for the development of quality, equity-focused leaders, it is important to understand how motivations of entrants align with those of school districts and policy makers. This paper contributes to the research on the so-called “principal pipeline” by analyzing the reflections of candidates from an institutional perspective. This view considers modern schools to be social structures governed by various norms, values, and rules. Official elements like an administrative license, or even simply enrollment in a licensure program, can become more than just a way to develop technical competencies but symbols whose meanings shift based on cultural assumptions. Using a qualitative analysis of interviews with eleven candidates, I argue that these interpretations are influenced by race, gender, and current life circumstances, and contribute to a mismatch in the personal and institutional goals for principal training.

### Keywords

principal licensure, cultural capital, institutions

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## **Branches in the Pipeline: Status-Seeking in Principal Licensure Candidates**

A major issue in education policy and school leadership is who chooses to enroll in Principal Preparation Programs (PPPs). Rising principal attrition alongside decreasing job satisfaction among those who remain has raised the importance of training a new generation of leaders (Taie & Lewis, 2023; Grissom et al., 2021). At the same time, the demands on principals are becoming more varied, complex, and intense (Grissom et al., 2021; Farley-Ripple, 2012; Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016), making recruitment and training of new principals more difficult. These trends are exacerbated in underperforming or disadvantaged schools, especially those in urban districts or serving largely students of color, where school leaders have shorter tenures and are more likely to leave for other schools (Béteille et al., 2012).

To address these challenges, researchers have been directing attention to strengthening the “principal pipeline” - the combination of systems, mentors, and incentives that can bring well-qualified new candidates into school leadership roles - with a focus on increasing equitable outcomes in schools (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2019). One concern has been the “leakiness” of the pipeline, where a vast pool of teachers has not translated into a ready bank of candidates prepared to lead, lost either in the training process, licensure regulations, or hiring practices (Fuller & Young, 2022). In particular the role of university-based principal preparation programs has come under scrutiny for their inability to identify and develop quality future leaders (Crow and Whiteman, 2016; Grissom et al., 2019; Turnbull et al., 2015; Hess & Kelley, 2007; Elmore, 2006).

This paper investigates this important issue from the perspective of candidates, asking: Who chooses to enroll in PPPs? What are their reasons for investing time and money in enrolling in these university programs? How do these reasons fit within the larger context of their life stories and career pathways? Of particular interest is how candidates consider equity, as the vast academic and social inequities in schools demand that PPPs actively select and develop equity-focused leaders (Khalifa, 2020).

This investigation looks at the principal pipeline from the other end, with one of the purposes to see how candidate reasons match (or mismatch) with organizational goals. My stance is grounded in an institutional perspective; that is, I interpret the modern schools as hierarchical social structures governed by various norms, values, and rules, all of which are organized by power and status (Portes, 2012; Hodgson, 2006). In this view, officially sanctioned symbols like an administrative license, or even enrollment in a PPP, are more than just tools meant to develop technical competencies, they also carry symbolic value and their meaning can shift based on cultural assumptions and personal history.

In the next section, I describe recent literature on PPPs and the principal pipeline, and also provide more detail on the institutional perspective, before briefly explaining my methodology. I then describe my findings around how some principal license candidates enroll with a clear focus on becoming leaders while for others enrollment is aligned more with finding meaning in career advancement, a distinction I argue is related to gender. I also describe how candidate views on equity highlight the mismatch between personal and organizational goals. I close by arguing that these two broad and quite fluid categories show how candidates follow branches in the pipeline leading to places other than the principalship. Acknowledging these motivations can push for important shifts in the role of PPPs, with implications for both the design and responsiveness of the notion of school leadership itself.

## The Principal Pipeline in an Institutional Context

A recent federal survey of school principals found that turnover approaches twenty percent, and one in ten had left the profession altogether (Taie & Lewis, 2023). Principals of schools with over 75 percent students of color in particular had higher rates of attrition. Furthermore, fewer principals reported having enthusiasm for the job or gaining satisfaction from their work. Meanwhile, a recent RAND corporation study found principal turnover was highest (around 21 to 23 percent) in high-poverty districts and in rural districts (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023), findings consistent with an earlier study by Béteille et al. (2012). This turnover has raised calls to strengthen the principal pipeline (Reyes et al., 2022; Turnbull et al., 2015).

Beyond attrition, the strength of the principal pipeline is of great interest because of overwhelming evidence that quality school leaders have a major impact on student achievement and school success (Grissom et al., 2021). Principals of color in particular have been shown to have positive impacts on minority students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Grissom et al., 2017a), in particular by attracting and hiring more Black teachers who have also been shown to lead students to stronger outcomes (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Redding, 2019; Perrone, 2022). Yet there is a “leaky” pipeline among BIPOC educators in particular; candidates of color have a more difficult time being hired, and principals of color are more likely to leave their positions (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Young & Fuller, 2022). Myung et al. (2011) suggests that one reason for the leak is that teachers choose to enroll in PPPs in part based on informal encouragement from administrators - being “tapped” by a school leader - and women and teachers of color are less likely to receive such encouragement.

University-based PPPs have received considerable criticism for their role in failing to recruit and prepare enough qualified principal candidates (Turnbull et al., 2015). They have been attacked for lax recruiting and admission standards (Crow & Whiteman, 2016), weak curricula (Hess and Kelley, 2007), and inadequate attention to the vital work of instructional coaching and development (Elmore, 2006). Furthermore, a study by Grissom et al. (2019) showed ambiguity about assessing the quality of PPPs in influencing the work of principals who had been hired. Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) have argued that universities working alone struggle to recruit underrepresented candidates to enroll in their programs. However, a survey of almost 400 principals found them to be largely satisfied with their own experiences in PPPs (Styron & Lemire, 2009), suggesting that principals and district officials may be evaluating quality on different standards.

Still, there is not a lot of data on the principal pipeline (Perrone et al., 2022). Important questions include who enters the principal preparation pipeline, what are the gender and demographic characteristics of these candidates, why might they leave without becoming school leaders, and why people choose to stay (Clement & Young, 2022). It is further challenging to find accurate data about the landscape of principal preparation or and assess the impact of PPPs on candidates once they earn their license (Anderson et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2019). These issues have proven to be complex as prospective candidates weigh potential incentives like the appeal of a new job title and increased salary against disincentives such as anticipated stress, bureaucratic mandates, and potential strife within a school community (Howley et al., 2005; Cooley & Shen, 2000). Some evidence suggests that large numbers of educators have obtained their administrative license without taking on leadership positions (Fairley-Ripple et al., 2012; Myung et al., 2011). For example, a survey conducted in the 1990s of Louisiana teachers with

administrative licenses found that 80% were uninterested in school leadership (Jordan et al., 1998).

My investigation is grounded in an institutional perspective. Institutions can be considered systems of accepted and widely prevalent social rules that structure social actions. The rules, including norms and values, create shared expectations, and they also mold individual aspirations to chase the social rewards within these systems (Hodgon, 2006). Schools are institutions where bureaucratic rules formalize clear social hierarchies, including the rewards and expectations for those in different positions (Ingersoll, 2009; Lortie, 2009). Power, grounded in culture, is necessarily central to this structure because they determine what skills, dispositions, habits, and other traits are valued (Portes, 2012). Bourdieu has theorized that schools legitimize the social order through a collection of credentials, awards, and titles; educators not only uphold this order but are active participants in it, seeking status and recognition through the same channels (Bourdieu, 1998). The patterns in principal licensure candidates and principal hiring nationwide can thus be interpreted as reflecting institutionalized ideas of what is expected of school leaders as well as who is worthy of filling that social role.

### Method

I invited newly enrolled candidates in a PPP to participate in this study. Eleven people elected to participate (see *Table 1: Participant Info*).

<b>Table 1: Participant Info</b>				
	“Next Step” Group			
<i>Name</i>	<i>Current Role</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Family Context</i>
Diane	Teacher	Native American	Female	2 children (1 in high school)
Janet	District Coach	Asian	Female	2 young children
Luz	Teacher/Coach	Hispanic	Female	2 young children
Nancy	Libr./Leadership Team	White	Female	2 school-aged children
Shayna	Teacher	White	Female	2 young children
Rose	Teacher/Program Coord.	Hispanic	Female	2 school-aged children
	“Focused” Group			
<i>Name</i>	<i>Current Role</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Family Context</i>
Aaron	Teacher/Dept. Leader	White	Male	No children
Brigitte	Teacher/Coach	White	Female	2 children (1 in high school)
Christine	Ed Consultant	White	Female	No children
Frank	Teacher/Dept. Leader	White	Male	1 young child
Michelle	Teacher	White	Female	2 older children

I conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with each participant ranging from 45 minutes to an hour. The interview questions were about participants’ background in the

education profession, their current role, and their process for choosing to enroll in a PPP. As participants spoke, I occasionally followed up with clarifying questions. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. I then used an in vivo coding process (Saldaña, 2021) to analyze my data by generating possible themes and look for trends across my participants' responses. These thematic trends helped form two broad and fluid classifications of participants. I checked the evidence from their transcripts for consistency both within groups and within the participants' individual responses.

### Findings: “Next Step” and “Focused” Participants

Using qualitative interviews gave insight into why people apply to university programs in the first place. The open-ended questions allowed me to put their choices within the context of their personal stories, the circumstances of their life, and their careers. When explaining their enrollment, the interview format gave participants space to uncover the reasons behind why they were willing to invest considerable time and money in a training program.

Of my eleven participants, seven were currently teachers. Some of these teachers also currently held leadership roles within their school. For example, Aaron and Frank were department leaders, Shayna was an instructional coach, and Rose helped coordinate her school's dual language program. Some were no longer teachers; Janet had taken a position in the district office supporting teachers, though still working on a “teacher line” that maintained her salary and benefits as if she were a full-time teacher. Christine was another exception; she had recently moved across the country and was working as an educational consultant while she looked for an administrative position. All participants had over ten years of experience. Four were educators of color. Six worked in large urban school districts, while others ranged from mid-size to small rural districts. Diane, for example, taught on a Native American reservation, and Brigitte worked in a small rural district with few schools.

In this section, I share findings from my analysis of the data. The most prominent theme to emerge from my interviews was a distinct, though not solid, divide between what I term “next step” candidates and “focused” candidates. After describing the characteristics of each, I share how participants described their family responsibilities, and motherhood in particular, as a consideration in thinking about their immediate career goals. I lastly discuss how the topic of equity in leadership did (or did not) arise in the interviews.

**“Next Step” Candidates.** My participants described a variety of reasons behind their choice to enroll in a PPP, many of which had little to do with actually becoming a principal. There was, however, a common thread among participants in what I term the “next step” group. These people had experienced some success as a teacher, the work of teaching now came more easily for them, they had been given some leadership opportunities within their schools, and they had received some encouragement from colleagues or administrators. In this context, completing a licensure program felt simply like the next step for their careers and for themselves.

Shayna's decision is an example of this dynamic. She had been an elementary teacher in a small city for fifteen years at the same school, gaining confidence and experience in her work. “I really enjoy what I do,” she said, explaining why she loved being an educator. “I always tell people, like, there's no other job in the world where you can act as silly and goofy as you want, and they pay you to do it.” Over the years she felt beloved by her school community; “I feel like a superstar,” she said at one point. Families frequently recognized her at the grocery, she saw her former students throughout the town, and she always had a place in local events. “I've kissed a

pig one time for a fundraiser and it was posted in the newspaper,” she said, describing how her role as a teacher had cemented her place in the community.

For her sixteenth year of teaching, she moved to teach at a different school one town over. The challenges of being in a new environment combined with her long experience made her consider her career future. She had seen a few colleagues pursue a licensure program, and so she thought she’d give it a shot: “[I was] completely out of my element, and then I thought okay, well, if I can change and adjust to this, then I’m just gonna go for it.” So, she applied and enrolled in the program:

I was feeling called to, like, do it, take the classes. I’m not being called to start tomorrow, or even right after the program. Like, I really am sitting back and just kind of waiting for the stars to align...

What is interesting here is that she felt “called” not by the role of being a school leader but just taking classes. The experience of being part of an administrative program and earning her administrative license itself was a draw.

Janet, a teacher of eleven years, described a similar dynamic. She was the child of refugee immigrants and had grown up and attended schools with mostly White students. Her experiences of isolation motivated her to pursue teaching: “I really wanted to help families that had similar experiences like me...I always knew when I was younger that I wanted to give back and help people that have similar struggles.” She worked in a major city with a diverse student population and was soon asked to take on the job of a Dean, though she was reluctant to take because of the increased stress and responsibilities of dealing with student misbehavior:

I initially didn’t want it, but I, you know, when your bosses are asking you something, you kind of get the pressure to...[I] just felt like my hand was forced. And so I did that for a year and it was a huge learning experience for me, you know, and I had a lot of doubt in that role.

That experience, though challenging, encouraged her to apply for a district position where she supported teachers across a range of schools. The recent changes in her positions got her thinking about where her career would go:

Then I started thinking about my career and the trajectory, and so I think this last year as an instructional coach and working district wide...it’s just really built up my confidence and in terms of like, okay, I can do this job. I might not be perfect at it, but I’m willing to learn.

As her confidence developed, she felt the forward momentum of having taken on new roles and actively sought opportunities to move beyond teaching. “There was a point where it just felt like, I don’t know...it kind of felt like I was moving backwards in my career,” she said, describing her motivation to apply to the licensure program.

In describing why they were pursuing an administrative license, Shayna and Janet shared reasons more about forward momentum than about wanting to be a school leader. This was a common trend in the interviews, and in fact many explicitly declared that they did not want to be principals. “The principal seat is not calling to me,” Janet stated directly. She continued:

From what I've noticed, I feel like principals, they kind of, and not that they sit back, you know, but they're kind of like doing the meta-planning. They have the skills, the knowledge, to build the master schedule or they have that institutional knowledge of doing all the spreadsheets and all those things where I feel like my skill set is more relational.

Janet considered herself a more "relational" person, far different from what she understood as the more managerial and technical nature of the principal role. Given this perception, she saw her skill set and competencies as fundamentally misaligned and thus did not want to pursue that level of school leadership.

Diane was much clearer in stating her reasons for enrolling in the licensure program: "So I just, I applied and they approved my stuff...and I started." Diane was a Native American educator with a fascinating journey into education. She had lived in a major urban area and worked for over a decade as a nurse in emergency rooms. The trauma and stress burned her out, and following the lead of some friends, she applied to a teaching program. Her region had few Native members or people of color either working in or attending schools. "I needed to be somewhere where I wasn't the only person that wasn't white anymore," she said, and so she looked for both a place to work and raise her kids that was more diverse.

She moved her family hundreds of miles away to start work at a public school located on a Native reservation. She found teaching there difficult: "It's really rough and it's a different culture, just, the reservation...it's really small," she said. Her kids are both older now and so she felt ready when her principal mentioned an incentive program that provided tuition for Native educators. Still, having seen the chaos, struggles with trust, and even legal challenges that go into administration at her school, she did not really think about being an administrator. "I never thought like, oh, one day I just want to be the principal because I see [my principal] running around," she said.

Rose was another candidate in the program who was clear about her future goals: "I just, through the course of this, realize I do not want to be principal," she said. When she was younger, Rose had left a doctoral program in linguistics but found the prospect of a career in research to be unenticing. In need of a job and with Spanish as her mother-tongue, she quickly found employment as a teacher in a dual language program. This turned into a rewarding and enjoyable career that had lasted several years. "To be honest, I like the lifestyle," she said, speaking of the summers off and time with her young kids.

Like others, Rose had been given leadership roles as she gained experience. But these experiences had turned her off to the desire to be a school leader. Part of it was a realization that school leaders have less control than they may imagine; she had witnessed her principal navigate a few delicate situations where the school had been in the press or had received parental pressure, and she concluded that sometimes there were limits to what could be done:

You want to move mountains that sometimes you can't move. You know, [parents] wanting to have their children protected from bullying or from different things, and you're not with those students all day. You cannot guarantee that the adult that is supervising in the classroom can be next to that child [throughout] the entire school, you know, you just, you cannot guarantee that.

What is clear from these descriptions is that some people enroll in PPPs for reasons other than wanting to become a principal. Some enrolled because they had been given leadership



experiences, others were encouraged by colleagues, and still others because they were responding to incentives. These variations in reasons are united by a shared feeling that enrolment in a licensure program seemed like the next step in a career, the next logical thing to do. In the next section I turn to candidates whose motivations for enrollment were more firmly connected to desire to become principals.

**“Focused” Candidates.** So far, I have described participants who relate a mix of experiences and encouragement as motivating their enrollment in a licensure program along with a tentativeness in their decisions to enroll. This second group, by contrast, displays a confidence and clarity of purpose that translates into a strong motivation to pursue school leadership. For this reason, I refer to this group as “focused” candidates.

An example is Aaron, who knew from a young age that he wanted to be an educator. He comes from a family of educators, and he remembers fondly his own high school principal, “a human mascot” with an enthusiastic personality. This role model solidified a goal for Aaron to be more than a teacher and he strove specifically to be a principal. This was not about money; he had started teaching at a young age and he was now near the top of the district salary schedule for teachers, placing him at an income level not too different from new principals. In that time he had been a teacher, department leader, a mentor teacher, and a leader of professional development. “At times it can be frustrating and demoralizing to see all the human components that make a school district work,” he said, but those were the very things that motivated him: “I find that really interesting.” All of these experiences had given him great confidence in his own abilities. “I generally like leadership positions,” he said, adding “I think that I’m capable of it.”

Frank was another candidate who always knew he wanted to be an educator. He was currently a department leader in a high school and he had worked hard to advance to this position. His application was rejected in his first effort applying to a teacher certification program, so he spent time as a paraprofessional before eventually reapplying and becoming a certified teacher. As a middle school teacher, he quickly developed: “I just had a lot of opportunity to gain skills, primarily instructionally, that got me to a point of really feeling like this is something I can do and being pretty good at it.” His school was supportive in cultivating his leadership, and as he gained confidence by the end of his fourth year he was asked to join the school instructional leadership team. When a department leader position opened at a nearby high school, he applied and was selected. Now, he had gotten to the point where his career goals were clear: he wanted to be a principal and eventually become a district superintendent. Enrolling in the licensure program was a necessary part of that journey.

While Aaron and Frank both entered the workforce committed to education, Michelle had taken a different path. She had been teaching third grade for over ten years, but this was actually her second career after working in public relations at a municipal corporation. When asked why she was in the licensure program, she was succinct in her explanation: “I wanna have a bigger impact.” She described her teaching experience as a mix of success in the classroom and supporting her colleagues. “Whenever we pull strategic groups, I’m the one who’s pulling the materials. I’m like ‘You do this! You do this!’” she said, and she was ready to increase her influence. “I know my accomplishments in my classroom, and I’m well respected in my school,” she said, and her development encouraged her to apply to a district-sponsored leadership training program. It was there that she realized she was ready to apply to a licensure program.

Some also mentioned administrative salaries as a chief reason for pursuing leadership. Christine, for example, was a highly skilled, passionate, and thoughtful educator. She was a National Board Certified teacher, who had moved from another state back to support her parents

in her rural home town. She thought deeply about education and had big plans for her future, but she acknowledged that part of her decision rested on the fact that she couldn't make ends meet financially on a teacher salary. "How can I live in this tiny little town and do the work I wanna do?" she asked, explaining part of her reason for pursuing school leadership.

In a similar situation, Brigitte had calculated that enrolling in a licensure program was only worth it if she was rewarded with a higher salary. Growing up, her father worked as a timber laborer and his wages barely sustained the family. She had a difficult time in school herself, had barely made it through college, and after graduating had struggled for several years to support her family. She saved enough money to return to school for her teaching license, and over the course of several years she developed a great pride in her ability to impact marginalized students:

I was a half-time instructional mentor, and half-time behavior specialist, and the second year of doing that I had people saying "Wow! You should consider administration." I was like, "No, that's never gonna happen," ...but it kind of planted that seed of wait, maybe I could make a difference in that way.

Brigitte worked with a mentor who "kind of lifted the curtain" on leadership and encouraged her to apply for the administrative license program. To pay for tuition, she had to take out private loans, a burden which was putting a strain on her finances. However, she calculated that it could pay off with a leadership position: "Right now, looking at when I get a position, even as an AP [Assistant Principal], with the difference in pay I should be able to really knock out the loans." Without an administrative salary, it simply would not work.

In this collection of educators, there was a much stronger clarity of purpose in their decision to enroll. They had all experienced success as educators. Similar to the other group, these educators had been encouraged to pursue administration, but for them this was paired with a clear desire to become a leader. Additionally, some mentioned clearly the motivation - or even the necessity - of a larger salary.

**Raising Families and Pursuing Leadership.** The presence of children arose repeatedly as candidates discussed their choices to pursue school leadership. The "next step" group consisted only of women with children. Four of the six people in this group were also teachers of color. Meanwhile, none of the members of the "focused" group were people of color. The only two men in my sample were also in this group. Aaron and Christine did not have children (although Christine notably was concerned about caring for her parents). Frank had just had a young child with his partner who was also an educator. Michelle's children were older. Brigitte's children were also older and it was important to her to consult with them:

I wanted my youngest, who is 15, I wanted her to be a sophomore in high school so that I wasn't trying to take over my own school while she was still in high school. And so I was waiting for them. And then she had some struggles and she's making her own way right now and it's been a bumpy path. But we had a talk, and she's like, "I can keep myself together. You can go back to school." So, I was like "Okay, well, then, I'm going to actually start the process."

Interestingly, Brigitte had become an educator in large part to support her children. She had grown up poor in a rural community, her dad working odd jobs while she qualified to receive free lunches at school. After she left high school, she worked various low paying manual jobs

and turned to raising foster children as a way to supplement her income. But her life became more complicated: “I got pregnant with my daughter, and my husband left me, and so I had a 12-month-old, and I was 3 months pregnant,” she told me. “After that, I was like, I have to be able to take care of my kids,” she said; she moved in with her father to save money and started pursuing her undergraduate degree. She only became a full-time teacher after working as a substitute in several schools. As a teacher, she had been able to work and raise her children. Now that they were somewhat independent, she felt she could go back to school for the next step, in this case an administrator’s license.

It was hard not to notice how everyone in the “next step” factored their position along a life cycle of raising children into their decision to enroll. Shayna, Janet, Rose, and Luz all had younger children; Diane’s youngest children were just completing high school (as was Brigitte, though as shown above this actually helped solidify her own focus). Their responses show them fully considering the impact on their families of assuming leadership positions. Rose articulated this calculus most clearly, articulating an awareness of the stress of school leadership with a desire to be present for her children:

I don’t want to go with [being a school leader] right now with younger kids at my house, you know, because it consumes your mental energy, your emotional energy. And I just feel like for the next few years while my kids are younger, I want to be able to invest in them.

For Rose, her time is a commodity that she can “invest” in career or in her children, and for the time being she chose the latter. Janet was also considering her young children, and in addition she felt subtly discouraged by her mentor:

But I also think [my boss] was very cautious about promoting me for the admin role because at the time my daughter was really young...it was almost like her trying to, like, shield me from just the struggles and challenges and the emotional toll that being an admin could take on a person, especially like a young mother at the time.

In Janet’s retelling, this is not necessarily an unkind discouragement. Her mentor was an older woman who perhaps had experienced the burdens of school leadership and parenthood. Regardless, Janet’s current stage of life and family were very much at hand in her thinking about her readiness for leadership.

**Personal Perspectives on Equity.** A final theme to emerge is notable by its absence, or rather its presence as a much lower priority. With issues of equity and recruiting diverse leaders being of such major concern for policy makers and researchers, I expected to hear these preoccupations reflected in the responses of my participants. They were not or they appeared in ways that were difficult to recognize. I did not explicitly ask about equity in leadership as I wanted to avoid contrived responses influenced by leading questions. When it came up, the topic was raised in different, mostly personal ways.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, three of the four participants of color brought up race or ethnicity unprompted. We saw above how Diane wanted to work specifically on a reservation and be “not the only person who wasn’t white.” These issues were also central to Janet’s descriptions for why she wanted to be a leader:

...the recommendation [to apply] came from one of my colleagues and friends that's really into, she truly believes in promoting and getting more BIPOC educators in leadership positions....[she was] telling, you know, all of her teachers that were teachers of color to go and, you know, get this scholarship so they can have a seat at the table.

Janet's identity as a BIPOC teacher gave her access into a small community of educators who look out for one another, and she found someone who wants "more BIPOC educators in leadership." This network gave her motivation to want "a seat at the table;" and she also mentions her scholarship, a state-sponsored program to increase the diversity of leadership programs.

Luz was also encouraged to join the program by a mentor, and she mentions the doubt she felt when thinking about her identity. She was an immigrant from Mexico and started teaching soon after college. She had married and followed her husband's military postings to a few locations around the nation, picking up teaching jobs at each spot. She had been successful and several principals had taken notice, though she wasn't sure she could do the work of a principal. "I wasn't considering it as much. Like, I will think about it, but I was like, 'Oh, no, I can't become a principal. I'm Mexican, and I have an accent.' Like, I can't." She only began to reconsider after a principal began asking for input, and Luz was then given leadership roles in instruction and curriculum. "I don't know. I'm still debating, though," she said. I placed Luz in the "next step" group, but it was clear from her reflections that she was beginning to see herself as a leader. Though becoming a school leader had yet to crystallize into a clear goal, she still spoke with pride of her ability to influence her fellow teachers. She was also a participant in the same district leadership training program as Michelle.

Aaron raised issues of equity and social justice as he explained why he wanted to be an administrator. He'd often been told by colleagues that he would make a good leader, and he reflected on how that was likely a result of his unearned privilege. He was tall, white, and spoke English with the command of a native speaker in the United States. "It's privilege that I acknowledge that allows me to become a leader more than other people, and people give me leadership attributes that I don't even have." Frank, who was also white, had perhaps the most detailed and nuanced allusions to equity and justice, also while explaining why he wanted to be a leader. "In my first year teaching, I was just like, you know, kids need to work harder and do better...That's what I experienced so that's what I took to the classroom." But he had connected with several educators focused on equity and shifted his perspective:

Now it's like a 180 of, like you know, it's the system that is playing our society and creating these outcomes. I think having lots of really hard conversations around race and equity and gender and all the other things that are associated with white supremacy and being pushed out, at the end of my fourth year I was just starting to think like, alright, I can do more than just be a specialist in this school.

However, not everyone raised topics around race and equity. It was important enough that if I noticed towards the end of the interview that these issues were not raised in any form, I explicitly asked about thoughts on leadership for equity and social justice. "I feel like that's a loaded question," Nancy responded when I asked. "I think about how important it is for us to teach kids to be good humans," she said as she thought through her response, adding "and to teach them...that we all come from different spaces and different backgrounds." When I asked Shanya, she first responded by saying "Our district is a little bit behind, because we're smaller."

She seemed aware that equity conversations in her district were different from those in the larger education community, but it was a topic that she cared about in her own way. “Being a school leader puts that power in my hands in order to work hard for all kids.” The issue was personal for her:

I was the first generation college student, and we were very poor. My parents were 16 when they had me. They were addicted to alcohol, like, I’ve lived a lot...and so I can hear when somebody’s struggling. I can hear how they could use a little bit of help, or I can be empathetic towards the things that they’re struggling with. I know what it’s like to have two kids in the education system and how hard that is, just raising, you know, kids through our system. I feel like I can level with just about any parent that comes into the classroom.

Nancy and Shayna’s responses are thoughtful, idealistic, and compassionate, yet they are also qualitatively different from those of Janet, Luz, Aaron, or Frank. There is no explicit mention of race, no recognition of the structural injustices built into an education system that marginalizes backgrounds, and no reflections on personal identity. These elements do not necessarily all appear together in the responses of other participants, though at least some aspects were apparent when Janet spoke of being a BIPOC leader or Aaron thought about the privileges he carried. The workings of race and ethnicity in schools was very personal for Luz and Janet, it was something they had lived. Others had experiences that were one step removed, or like Shayna were personal yet confrontations with a different type of socioeconomic reality. The responses were united in their absence of centering educational inequity in their motivations for becoming a leader; it was a topic people thought about, but in their own personal ways.

### **Personal and Institutional Goals: The Aims of Schools and Candidates**

The purpose of this study was to better understand why educators enroll in PPPs. By using open ended questions and being attentive to the richness of the stories of my participants, I hoped to put their aspirations and career moves within the greater contexts of their lives. Researchers are concerned with the disproportionately white and male demographics of principals (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023), as well as with developing leaders with clear commitments to equitable leadership (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2020). Incentives, salary, support, and meaningful district pathways have all been raised as factors in the decisions to become a principal (Howley et al., 2005; Cooley & Shen, 2000; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022). In this concluding section, I want to add depth to these trends in the research by arguing that two different (but fluid) groups of principal candidates balance considerations of career advancement with their family needs. Some are focused on becoming a school leader, and they gave few hints of engaging in a balancing act. Some see an administrative license as a “next step,” and their balance tipped towards family considerations with the principalship almost beside the point even as they sought the status of leadership. Against this backdrop, the focus on candidate quality, diversity, and the moral imperatives of social justice and equity are different (perhaps misaligned) with the goals of individuals. This shows how institutional aims can give way to more personal considerations grounded in culturally produced ideas of status, and the mismatch might account in part for some of the “leakiness” of the principal pipeline. This difference in purpose is important for pushing researchers and educators to consider the design and purpose of licensure programs; more importantly, they raise the need to challenge institutional definitions of leadership within schools.

## Different Motivations for Enrolment in PPPs

A major finding from this study is that enrollment in PPPs can be seen as shaped by two different overarching motivations, what I termed the “focused” and “next step” groups. There are likely many more reasons that prompt people to enroll, and there is likely overlap between the two. However, the words of my participants demonstrated enough consistent distinctions to warrant creating these classifications.

As I outlined above, some enter with a clear purpose and are focused on attaining a leadership position. Like Frank and Aaron, they may have decided early that this was a role they wanted to attain, or like Michelle they may have developed a desire over time as they gained competence and respect as an educator. This group contained both of my male participants, and also was uniformly white. Not only does this mirror national trends in leadership candidates (Fuller & Young, 2022; Perrone, 2022), it also underscores the persistent relevance of race and gender in influencing who chooses school leadership.

One reason this is important is because candidates who enter with a clear focus have different needs from the licensure program. They of course want the license, but they are also intent on learning concrete skills in preparation for school leadership. This doesn’t mean that they are better or more skilled educators; however, their intent to become school leaders signals they are better positioned to reckon with the political pressure, emotional challenge, and mental stress that awaits them. An implication of this is that they have different expectations of their university program, looking for a close alignment with their leadership needs without searching if this was the right path. This could turn to frustration, as Frank said at one point: “There were people in the program that I felt like didn’t necessarily have the background to be doing this.”

What I termed the “next step” group showed qualitatively different reasons for enrolling in PPPs. All were committed to education; they had been given leadership opportunities and felt the promise of being able to make a difference at a larger scale. Still, there was an ambivalence in their descriptions of why they were pursuing an administrative license. They lacked clear conviction and a tentative commitment to undertaking leadership. Instead, they spoke more of pursuing a license as part of their “trajectory,” as Janet said, or like Shayna they felt called to take classes rather than to lead.

Nancy exemplified the ambivalence of the “next step” group. She had taught in three different states and in a variety of different contexts, moving around the country as her husband changed jobs. She had two school-age children, and she had recently begun working as a librarian. During COVID, she was given several leadership opportunities. In explaining her decision to enroll, she said “I needed, like, a natural path to what comes next, as far as supporting teachers. Like, I really have started to look at the bigger picture.” This quote is representative of this group; it shows a desire to think bigger about their roles by finding a literal next step. By invoking a “natural path to what comes next,” Nancy is looking ahead while remaining vague in her commitment to seizing the reins of a school community. These teachers may one day develop the conviction and focus that will support a plunge into leadership, but at the moment it is not yet fully present.

It is striking that the “next step” group included all women and that all four participants of color were in this group. They all mentioned having mentors or administrators who believed in them. Several had also responded to organizational incentives; Diane, Janet, and Luz had all received a scholarship, Shayna had received vouchers from her district for her past work as a mentor teacher (though Aaron, in the “focused” group, had received vouchers as well), and Luz was part of a district mentorship program. Thus, they had in a sense been “tapped,” brought into

the leadership pipeline by mentors or incentives. Yet, this hadn't translated into a deep commitment to leadership. One reason for this may be that their motivations were fundamentally mismatched with the needs of school districts, a theme which I turn to next.

### **Branches in the Pipeline: Personal and Institutional Goals in Leadership and Equity**

Researchers have argued that PPPs need to be better aligned with district needs by being more selective and directly addressing institutional leadership goals (Turnbull et al., 2015; Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Hess & Kelley, 2007). But that may be misunderstanding the meaning and significance of PPPs for many candidates. The words of the "next step" group in particular pushes us to consider licensure programs as less about leadership and more about status. When Janet speaks of building up her confidence or Shayna says she's just "gonna go for it" - recalling a prize that is out there to be earned by those who take a leap - they are speaking to something more personal and connected with a sense of worth.

This impression is furthered by the use of metaphors like "a natural path" or trajectories, phrases that suggest a relationship with the institution of school based in conformity and compliance - if they follow a set path in a predetermined direction, they will be led to a place of reward. This is a view that turns the educational bureaucracy, with its career ladders and salary schedules, into a literal natural feature of the landscape of our modern society. To be a part of this system is to be on a fixed and well-defined road, locked into an institutional course with predictable rewards. "There's a point where you've invested a lot of time and to leave would require, like, a lot of transition energy," was how Rose described it at one point, going on to say "you kind of want to get higher in the pay scale."

Descriptions like this reframe administrative licenses as a type of cultural capital, a symbolic or cultural resource that nevertheless allows access to scarce rewards and status (Lareau and Weininger, 2003). These licenses of course signal technical expertise, but they are also symbols wrapped in institutional structures of power that confer status. Rose adroitly expressed this when explaining why, even with her ambivalence about becoming a school leader, she had enrolled in a licensure program. In her role coordinating a dual-language program, she had been placed in many situations where she had to advocate for a course of action, but she often felt discounted:

For some reason it seems like if you have the administrator title then all of a sudden your ideas are a little...your ideas are superior to other people's ideas even though that might not really be the case. So I thought well, maybe I need to get the credentials so that at least my ideas are, you know, [it's] not just me.

When Rose says it's "not just me," she means that her license will bestow an official stamp of legitimacy on her words and actions as she moves through her school.

While it may be true that advancing through a career in schools demands a degree of compliance with organizational rules, I see this theme as a reflection of the deeply gendered nature of my participant sample. As women with young children, participants in the "next step" group simply thought differently about their careers, including how much of themselves they wanted to give to the work of schooling. When many say outright that they have no interest in becoming a principal, they are perhaps hedging against the overwhelming challenges they perceive in the job - something many had seen firsthand through observing principals who had

been their mentors and leaders. Yet, they still sought the legitimacy and validation of moving up through the ranks.

This dynamic seems straight out of Weberian theories of bureaucracy, with people trapped in the iron cage of modern organizations as they are appeased by rewards of salary and status (Weber, 1991). Licenses play an outsized role in relatively inflexible bureaucratic organizations like schools, places where hierarchies are well defined and status is so closely aligned to one's role and title (Ingersoll, 2009). In this respect, it could be argued that the "next step" and "focused" groups were more alike than different. Across all participants, there was a noted absence of vision, moral purpose, and an urgent desire for change, even when people expressed a strong desire to be a leader. Both groups showed a willingness to be a part of an organization with a quite rigid structure. After all, an important part of the appeal of the principalship is the title and all the related trappings that come with the position.

Willingness to join the organization was very apparent around the topic of equity in leadership. Researchers have argued that school leaders need to have a firm commitment to the learning of all children, a thorough awareness of the systemic inequalities in schools both at present and historically (Khalifa, 2020), and a proficiency in a range of equitable leadership practices (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). My participants at times spoke very generally, if at all, about such issues; some were personal and thoughtful in discussing equity, sometimes highlighting reflections on their own identity, yet none addressed any of these more general and, in a sense, fundamental themes of equity. Does this suggest that my participants are ill prepared to be equitable school leaders? It seems an unfair question. Failing to use the right words should not disqualify someone from being committed to such change, just as giving favorable responses is no guarantee of being an effective leader. For educators working in segregated school districts of mostly white teachers serving mostly white students, such responses may just as well be a product of lack of exposure. To accuse such educators of ignorance further presupposes that the educational community has concrete answers to our systemic inequities outside of hiring more non-white principals (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2022). Instead, I interpret these responses about equity to be consistent with their motivations for pursuing licensure: they are personal reasons expressed against larger and different institutional goals, the result of people following different branches in the principal pipeline.

### **Redefining leadership and leadership programs**

For those concerned with the future of the principal pipeline, the reasons provided by my participants will not be very reassuring. While researchers call for quality training, a greater diversity in candidates, and a clear commitment to equity, the responses of my mostly white candidates showed them to be more nebulous in their vision for becoming a leader, balancing family priorities with a commitment to a career in leadership, and in some cases turned off by the principalship altogether. As more people are sought to become the next generation of school principals, these themes might very well be the individual drips of the leaky pipeline.

I suggested above that lack of clarity or enthusiasm for leaders is the result of a mismatch between institutional and personal goals. However, it may be more accurate to contend that education is institutionally organized - through its norms, rewards, and structure - to select individuals who are more likely to uphold the current order (Heifetz et al., 2009; Miller, et al., 2022). The stark difference in motivations described here thus raises an opportunity to think differently about leadership. Ideas exist, such as stronger partnerships between districts and PPPs, future leader training programs at the district level, and incentives for license programs.



With women underrepresented in leadership (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), structures such as intentional mentorship and training programs (Young and McCleod, 2001) can change how female educators consider their future aspirations. Because of the sense of family responsibilities, greater numbers of women are unlikely to pursue leadership unless these life-cycle issues are addressed. Some women are willing or able to get other support for raising children; but most of the women in the “next step” group were not. As large scale social and cultural dynamics around family responsibilities are unlikely to change in the short term, educators and district officials can instead change the nature of leadership roles to foster the inclusion of more women in leadership. This could include redefining what it means to be a leader, and fundamentally altering demands on principals that are unrealistic even for people with few other responsibilities.

One idea is to create a wider array of leadership roles with focuses on instruction, operations, school culture, or other school aspects, each with an accompanying increased salary reflecting the higher skill and competencies required. There is a middle ground between current teacher and administrator salaries that can be leveraged to cultivate leadership in a broader range of educators. These could also potentially be hybrid positions that include teaching responsibilities or exist across schools. Such creative role design could be attractive for smaller districts with less funding available for high administrative salaries. Other ideas include reducing the impractical pressures and demands on principals, providing resources for necessary social-emotional and interventions, and continuing to invest in programs that foster the next generation of leaders.

A deeper reckoning awaits PPPs. My participants showed clearly that in many cases their presence was not directly tied to becoming a school leader. Instead, they were enrolled as part of a search for cultural meaning and status, an effort that did not require becoming an actual principal. Put bluntly, PPPs seek the revenue that more enrollment brings, placing them in the middle of the mismatch between the goals of individuals and larger goals of training new principals.

Awareness of this dynamic should help universities match their curriculum to the needs of their candidates in the short run, and encourage their strong partnership with school districts in the long run. Such collaboration could spur innovation and might also help change the structures of rigid licensure requirements that are of questionable value (Fuller & Young, 2009; Grissom et al., 2017b). Ultimately, anyone interested in strengthening the principal pipeline would do well to account for the deeper cultural and symbolic motivations behind individual pursuit of school leadership.

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