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Principal Preparation as Career Development: A Human-Centered Curriculum Design Approach to Skills Development for Future School Leaders in the United States

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Abstract

Principal preparation in the United States is often organized around leadership standards, administrative competencies, instructional leadership, legal responsibilities, and school improvement. While these areas remain essential, they do not fully capture the developmental process through which educators move into the role of principal. This matters because aspiring principals must navigate changes in identity, authority, relationships, and responsibility, while preparation programs and districts must support that transition without reducing readiness to visible performance alone. This study examines principal preparation as a human-centered career-development process and asks how humanized elements are represented within the curriculum and developmental structures of U.S. principal-preparation systems. Because formal preparation documents communicate what programs are expected to value, teach, and assess, the study draws on a scoping-informed literature review and qualitative document analysis of publicly available national standards, federal and state policy documents, program materials, residency and fellowship models, and practitioner-development resources. The analysis shows that humanized principal preparation is represented less as a distinct curriculum area than as an unevenly embedded developmental orientation. Humanized elements appeared through ethical and relational formation, reflection and mentoring for leadership identity development, authentic clinical learning, and continuity of support beyond certification. At the same time, these elements were often embedded within accountability structures that required visible

evidence of candidate competence. The findings suggest that humanized preparation cannot be inferred from the presence of mentoring, reflection, or internships alone. Instead, it depends on whether these structures provide equitable access to meaningful leadership work, psychologically safe opportunities to interpret experience, and sustained support during the transition into principalship. The study contributes to principal-preparation scholarship by showing how formal documents represent aspiring principals as developing professionals and by offering recommendations for aligning competency expectations with mentoring, reflective practice, authentic clinical learning, and early-career support.

Keywords: human-centered curriculum design; principal preparation; educational leadership; career development; leadership identity; skills development

1. Introduction

Educational leadership preparation programs (ELPPs) play an important role in developing effective principals who make a positive impact on student achievement and overall school success by contributing to improving academic outcomes, reducing student absenteeism, increasing teacher retention, and strengthening school climate (Grissom et al., 2021). Furthermore, shifts in the educational landscape with policies such as Race to the Top (RTTT), have prompted growing attention to educational leadership preparation programs and how quality school leaders are developed (Grissom et al., 2021; Reyes-Guerra & Lochmiller, 2016).

ELPPs are designed to meet accreditation standards and define what aspiring school principals should know and be able to do. Previous research has examined these programs from multiple perspectives including program design, instructional practices, equity, leadership standards, and organizational improvement (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Often substantial attention is given to formal knowledge like management, law, finance, and related organizational competencies (Fanoos & He, 2021). And while administrative competencies are valuable to understanding the principal preparation architecture, they do not capture the full developmental process of becoming a school leader.

Humanized preparation matters because the transition into principalship affects multiple stakeholders. For aspiring principals, it shapes whether preparation offers space to interpret uncertainty, develop relational authority, and build a sustainable leadership identity. For preparation programs and districts, it clarifies whether mentoring, internships, and reflection function as developmental support or mainly as evidence for accountability. For schools and communities, it matters because principals' readiness to exercise judgment, sustain relationships, and support adult and student well-being affects the conditions under which teaching and learning occur.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how publicly available U.S. principal-preparation documents represent the human dimensions of leadership development. These documents communicate what is valued within principal preparation and provide insight into how educational leadership development is formally conceptualized. By conducting a scoping review of existing scholarship and qualitative document analysis of available principal preparation program materials, national leadership standards, and policy documents, on educational leadership preparation, our paper aims to highlight the human-centered elements of principal preparation systems and contribute to a more holistic understanding of leadership

development. We also identify where these elements remain underdeveloped and offers recommendations for designing preparation systems that better connect competency expectations with mentoring, reflection, authentic clinical learning, and sustained support during the transition into principalship.

2. Conceptual Background: Principal Preparation as Human-Centered Career Development

Our study approaches principal preparation as both competency development and career development (Nagy, Froidevaux & Hirschi, 2019). Competency-based frameworks remain essential because they define the knowledge, skills, and professional responsibilities expected of future school leaders. However, they do not fully explain how aspiring principals move from an established professional role into a leadership role that involves new forms of authority, relational responsibility, and organizational judgment.

The aforementioned developmental process includes human competencies or dimensions such as cultivating professional identity, engaging in reflection, forming ethical judgment, developing interpersonal relationships, and making a commitment to equity (Mullen 2017; Jackson & Moraguez, 2025; Richard & Cosner, 2024; Ni et al., 2019). Within preparation programs, human dimensions of leadership development emerge in manifold experiences and challenges. In one example, novice principals cited conflict navigation and preserving relationships as a challenging but important aspect of school leadership (Nelson et al., 2008).

Human-centered aspects of leadership development also appear in self-reflection. Aspiring principals engage in reflection to develop awareness and promote judgement that is equity-oriented (Jackson & Moraguez, 2025). Given increasingly diverse student populations, ELPPs need to prepare future leaders to recognize how inequities and broader social conditions shape school communities and to navigate the practical, relational, and organizational challenges these conditions create for school leadership (Biolchino, 2024). Human-centered preparation may also require future leaders to self-examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and biases to strengthen cultural awareness and respond more effectively to the varied needs of students, families, and school communities (Miller & Martin, 2015). These examples represent only a few of the human-centered dimensions evident within ELPPs and throughout the array of principal preparation literature.

Although these areas have been examined, they are routinely investigated individually or as elements within broader preparation frameworks. Less is known about how the human side of leadership development is represented collectively within policies, standards, and curricular structures that shape principal preparation. The gap in the literature lies in understanding whether and how these human-centered concerns are reflected within the formal structures that guide principal preparation. Examining these documents can therefore provide insight into how preparation policies and program frameworks define the work of becoming a principal and support future leaders as developing professionals. This focus requires attention not only to whether human-centered elements are mentioned, but also to how they are embedded within the curriculum and developmental structures of principal preparation.

Guided by this gap, the following research question directed our analysis: **How are humanized elements represented within the curriculum and developmental structures of U.S. principal-preparation systems?** Humanized elements were understood as curricular principles and support structures that recognize aspiring principals as developing professionals.

3. Methods

The current study employed qualitative document analysis, informed by a scoping literature review (Pham, Rajic, et al., 2014), to examine how humanized elements are represented within the curricula of U.S. ELPPs. Qualitative document analysis enables the systematic examination of institutional texts and the meanings embedded within them (Cardno, 2018; Morgan, 2022). We selected this design because the research question focused on how professional standards and policies conceptualize principal development. The analysis also considered how preparation programs translated these expectations into curricular and developmental practices.

3.1. Scoping-Informed Literature Search

The literature search was not treated as a separate evidence base from the document analysis, but served two functions within the study design: First, it identified the concepts and empirical debates that informed the analysis, including leadership identity, reflection, mentoring, clinical learning, equity, and early-career support. Second, it helped contextualize the selected documents by showing how these humanized elements had been discussed in recent principal-preparation scholarship. The document analysis then examined whether and how these elements were represented within the standards, policy texts, and program materials that formally shape principal preparation.

Literature searches were conducted in the ERIC and Web of Science (WoS) databases to identify research related to principal preparation and leadership development. ERIC was searched on July 15th, 2026, using the following Boolean search strategy to include appropriate sources: “principal preparation” OR “educational leadership preparation” OR aspiring principals OR principal candidates AND leadership identity OR skills development OR career development -teacher. The term “teacher” was explicitly excluded from the search results to limit retrieval to literature focused on principal and educational leadership preparation rather than teacher preparation. The search was limited to publications since 2017 and yielded 62 records. WoS was searched using TS= (“principal preparation” *educational leadership*) refined by Country/Region to include only the USA on June 30th, 2026, and yielded 112 records. The two results were compared for duplicates. Only peer-reviewed articles and book chapters were included.

3.2. Document Selection and Sampling

Purposive criterion sampling was used to construct a corpus aligned with the research question. This form of sampling is appropriate when documents are selected because of their relevance to a clearly defined institutional issue (Dalglish et al., 2020; Morgan, 2022).

The materials selected for analysis were designed to capture variation in institutional level and document function: National standards established broad expectations for educational leadership. Federal and state texts showed how these expectations were authorized or regulated. Program materials provided more detailed descriptions of curriculum and clinical experience,

while practitioner resources illustrated how mentoring was conceptualized across the leadership career continuum. Following recommendations for qualitative document analysis, the document set was assembled to align source selection with the study's research purpose and to preserve variation across institutional levels and document functions (Cleland et al., 2023; Morgan, 2022).

A document was included when it met two main criteria. First, it had to be issued by a government body or recognized educational leadership organization. Second, it had to provide substantive information about principal-preparation curriculum or developmental support. Sources were excluded when they offered only brief promotional descriptions or lacked sufficient detail to address the research question. Duplicate versions were removed, and the most current relevant edition was retained when multiple versions were available.

The selected documents were not intended to represent every principal-preparation program in the United States. Instead, information-rich sources were chosen to provide variation across influential standards and selected program models. The conclusions are therefore interpretive and conceptual, not statistically generalizable. The final corpus included 12 documents representing national standards and policy frameworks, along with preparation and mentoring models, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THE FINAL CORPUS

No.	Document or Program	Category	Purpose in the Analysis
1	Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)	National standards	Ten national standards developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA)
2	National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards	National preparation standards	Standards for the design, review, and recognition of educational leadership preparation programs
3	Quality Measures toolkit (King, 2018)	Program evaluation toolkit	Framework for examining the quality and continuous improvement of principal preparation programs
4	Title II guidance under the Higher Education Act	Federal policy guidance	National context for educator preparation, program accountability, and reporting requirements
5	Florida Level I Educational Leadership Programs and Level II Principal Preparation Program requirements	State policy framework	Florida requirements for initial educational leadership

No.	Document or Program	Category	Purpose in the Analysis
			preparation and advanced principal preparation
6	Illinois Administrative Code, Title 23, Part 30: Programs for the Preparation of Principals in Illinois	State regulatory framework	Illinois requirements for the approval and operation of principal preparation programs
7	Massachusetts Principal Induction and Mentoring Handbook	State induction guidance	Guidance on induction and mentoring after principals enter the role
8	University of Washington Danforth Educational Leadership Program	University-based program	Example of a university-based model for preparing educational leaders
9	University of Illinois Chicago EdD in Urban Education Leadership	University-based program	Example of a university-based preparation model focused on urban school leadership
10	North Carolina State University Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA)	Residency-based program	Practice-intensive preparation model that includes a leadership residency
11	National Aspiring Principals Fellowship	Fellowship model	Alternative preparation pathway combining coursework, coaching, and applied leadership development
12	NAESP National Mentor Training and Certification Program	Mentor development program	Model of continuing professional support through mentor training and certification beyond initial preparation

Source: Authors' compilation based on study documents.

3.3. Data Analysis

The corpus was analyzed through a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic process (Mackieson et al., 2019). Deductive attention was informed by the study's conceptualization of humanized preparation, while inductive coding allowed new patterns to develop through close reading. This combined approach was appropriate because the study began with a defined interest in humanized development but did not a-priori assume how that concept would appear across the documents (Kuckartz, 2019).

The analysis was situated within an interpretivist orientation. Institutional texts do not carry a single meaning independent of their organizational contexts. Their significance is developed through the relationship between language and institutional purpose (Aspers & Corte, 2019). For this reason, references to mentoring or reflection were not assigned identical meanings across all documents. Mentoring could be framed as sustained developmental guidance in one text but function mainly as supervision in another. Each provision was interpreted in relation to the purpose and audience of the document in which it appeared.

Standards and program materials reflect the priorities of the organizations that produce them, while their omissions may reveal dimensions of preparation that receive limited formal recognition (Cleland et al., 2023; Dalglish et al., 2020). Documents were treated as institutional products that communicate particular understandings of leadership and professional readiness, instead of neutral descriptions of existing practice. We therefore examined both the elements explicitly included in the documents and the developmental concerns that remained weakly articulated.

Analysis began with repeated reading of each document. During this stage, we examined how principal readiness was defined and how candidate support was represented. Attention was also given to the institutional purpose of each text. Initial notes captured recurring ideas and points of contradiction. This process helped preserve context before individual passages were coded.

The unit of analysis was a meaningful passage related to principal development. A passage could include a sentence or a connected section of text. Coding focused on meaning instead of isolated terminology. For example, a reference to coaching was examined in relation to its stated purpose and connection to evaluation. It was not automatically coded as humanized support.

The first coding cycle identified how documents represented candidate development. Initial codes addressed relational support and leadership identity. Other codes emerged through the analysis, including tensions between developmental guidance and performance accountability. Earlier documents were revisited when new distinctions became visible. This recursive movement between individual passages and complete texts is consistent with interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

During the second coding cycle, related codes were compared across the corpus. Codes were grouped when they reflected a shared developmental process. Differences were retained when similar terminology served contrasting functions. Reflection within confidential coaching, for example, was distinguished from reflection submitted as an assessment requirement. Preserving these differences allowed the analysis to examine the conditions under which humanized preparation was supported or constrained.

Themes were developed when groups of codes formed meaningful patterns across documents and contributed directly to the research question. The importance of a theme was not determined solely by frequency. A pattern could also be significant because it revealed a contradiction or a consistent area of silence (Lindgren et al., 2020). Candidate well-being appeared less frequently than mentoring, but its limited operationalization was analytically important because the documents often assigned principals responsibility for supporting others.

The final thematic structure was reviewed against both coded passages and complete documents. Themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and sufficient distinction from

one another. Disconfirming evidence was retained when a source complicated an emerging interpretation. Through this process, the themes became analytic arguments about the corpus instead of summaries of individual documents.

We recognized themes as interpretive products shaped through engagement with the documents and research question (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Trustworthiness was therefore supported through contextual sensitivity and transparent reporting, along with a clear connection between documentary evidence and interpretation (Cena et al., 2024).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Humanized Elements of Curriculum in U.S. Principal Preparation

In response to the research question, our analysis shows that humanized elements are represented in U.S. principal-preparation systems less as a separate curriculum area than as an unevenly embedded developmental orientation. Across the documents, humanized preparation appeared through four interconnected forms: ethical and relational formation, reflection and mentoring for leadership identity development, authentic clinical learning, and continuity of support beyond certification. These elements positioned aspiring principals as developing professionals who must learn not only to demonstrate leadership competencies, but also to interpret authority, relationships, uncertainty, and responsibility during the transition into school leadership. At the same time, the documents revealed an important tension: humanized preparation was often supported through structures that also served accountability purposes, including internships, mentoring, reflection, and performance assessment.

National standards supplied a broad normative language, while state policies and program materials translated selected elements into mentoring arrangements, reflective activities, and clinical responsibilities. The documents also exposed an important tension: candidates were positioned as developing professionals who needed time and support to construct a leadership identity, yet their development remained embedded within systems that required visible evidence of competence. Table 2 summarizes the distinctive contribution of each document to humanized principal preparation and identifies the developmental mechanisms and limitations observed across the corpus.

TABLE 2

CROSS-DOCUMENT REPRESENTATION OF HUMANIZED PRINCIPAL PREPARATION

Document or Model	Primary Humanized Contribution	Developmental Mechanism	Critical Limitation Identified
NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS			
PSEL 2015	Ethical, relational, and sustainable leadership	Shared values, reflection, professional learning, and attention to adult well-being	Well-being is acknowledged but not translated into detailed candidate-support structures

Document or Model	Primary Humanized Contribution	Developmental Mechanism	Critical Limitation Identified
NELP Building-Level Standards	Candidate formation through knowledge and professional commitments	Sustained internship, trained mentoring, and reflective practice	Development remains closely tied to competency evidence and program review
Quality Measures Toolkit	Individualized and developmentally oriented preparation	Formative feedback, structured reflection, and carefully designed clinical practice	Leadership identity and emotional readiness receive limited explicit attention
FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY			
Title II, Part A Guidance	Preparation as part of a continuing leadership pathway	Permissible funding for clinical learning, induction, and job-embedded support	Authorizes humanized support without guaranteeing implementation
Florida Educational Leadership Framework	Ethics, constructive relationships, and adult well-being	Self-reflection, mentoring, coaching feedback, and early-career support	Relational development is operationalized mainly through assessment and certification
Illinois Principal Preparation Regulations	Shared institutional responsibility for candidate development	Extended internship, mentor preparation, and repeated feedback	Personal and emotional dimensions of the transition remain weakly articulated
Massachusetts Induction And Mentoring Handbook	Continued development during novice principalship	Sustained mentoring, guided inquiry, and organizational support	Quality depends on district capacity and implementation
PROGRAM AND RESIDENCY MODELS			
Danforth Educational Leadership Program	Values-based transition from educator to organizational leader	Professional growth plan, coaching, and applied ethical inquiry	Human development remains aligned with formal competency expectations
UIC Urban Education Leadership Program	Equity-centered and socially situated leadership	Residency, intensive coaching, and practitioner inquiry	Public materials provide limited detail about candidates' emotional transition

Document or Model	Primary Humanized Contribution	Developmental Mechanism	Critical Limitation Identified
NELA Residency	Layered and individualized developmental support	Principal mentoring, confidential executive coaching, and progressive responsibility	Candidate learning remains connected to standards-based evidence
National Aspiring Principals Fellowship	Accessible and job-embedded preparation	Monthly coaching, cohort learning, and school-based inquiry	Local clinical experiences may vary across candidates and settings
PRACTITIONER DEVELOPMENT			
NAESP Mentor Certification Program	Mentoring as a specialized professional practice	Formal mentor preparation, reflective dialogue, and supervised application	Influence depends on programs and districts using trained mentors

Source: Authors' conceptual model based on study findings.

4.1.1. Ethical and Relational Formation

The documents consistently framed principalship as an ethical and relational practice. PSEL associated effective leadership with the cultivation of an “inclusive, caring, and supportive school community” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015, p. 13). It also encouraged leaders to sustain their own effectiveness while “maintaining a healthy work-life balance” (p. 14). These statements connect professional responsibility with the quality of relationships created within schools and the leader’s capacity to sustain that work. NELP extended this orientation into candidate preparation by stating that program completers should “model ethical behavior in their personal conduct and relationships and to cultivate ethical behavior in others” (NPBEA, 2018, p. 13). Ethical leadership was therefore presented as conduct enacted through relationships, not only as knowledge of professional rules. Florida’s standards reinforced this position through expectations for “constructive conversations” and attention to the “well-being of all students and adults” (Florida State Board of Education [FSBE], 2022, p. 2). Together, these documents positioned authority as a relational responsibility because candidates were expected to consider how their conduct and decisions would shape the experiences of people within their schools.

Program materials demonstrated how this ethical orientation could become part of the preparation curriculum. Danforth connected ethical practice with candidates’ examination of their own leadership, expecting them to engage in “self-analysis of own values, behaviors, and dispositions” (University of Washington College of Education, n.d., p. 14). The program also expected candidates to respond to moral dilemmas by using their “personal values and beliefs to guide actions” (p. 15). These expectations made ethical development personally consequential because candidates had to examine how their identities influenced the exercise of authority. UIC similarly sought to “intensify leaders’ capacity as change agents” and prepared candidates to work through relationships within urban school communities

(University of Illinois Chicago, College of Education, n.d., para. 1). In both programs, ethical preparation extended beyond decision-making procedures to include reflection on how candidates understood themselves as emerging leaders. This framing positioned ethical leadership as part of the developmental process of assuming responsibility for a broader school community.

The literature reinforces this interpretation while exposing an important limitation. Research on principal leadership academies shows that strong preparation is contextual and relational, particularly when universities and districts share responsibility for candidate development (Fusarelli et al., 2019). Orr (2020) similarly argued that active leadership learning requires candidates to investigate practice instead of receiving leadership knowledge passively. These studies support the documentary finding that ethical formation develops through engagement with people and the examination of professional dilemmas. The standards establish expectations for relational conduct, while the program materials create opportunities for candidates to examine how their values influence that conduct.

However, the documents devoted greater attention to how principals should care for others than to how candidates should be sustained during preparation. Although PSEL explicitly recognized work–life balance, the examined materials provided fewer concrete curricular structures for helping candidates process stress and emotional strain. Mahfouz and Richardson (2021) identified well-being as a neglected dimension of principal preparation despite the emotional demands associated with school leadership. More recent evidence indicates that programs still need intentional strategies for embedding well-being within existing preparation structures (Adair & Reames, 2026). This creates a notable contradiction: candidates are prepared to assume responsibility for the well-being of school communities, yet their own capacity to manage the emotional demands of leadership may remain peripheral to the curriculum. Humanization is consequently directed outward more consistently than inward.

4.1.2. Reflection and Relational Support for Identity Development

Reflection emerged as the central process through which candidates interpreted experience and developed an emerging leadership identity. NELP required reflective practice and lifelong learning, stating that preparation programs should provide “ongoing experiences for candidates to examine, refine, and strengthen the leadership platform” guiding their decisions (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2018, p. 7). The Quality Measures toolkit similarly positioned collective meaning-making as a feature of program quality through “interactive, collaborative reflection” on program design and implementation (Education Development Center [EDC], 2023, p. 5). Danforth’s Professional Growth Plan allowed candidates to revise goals in response to experience, while NELA used weekly reflection and a Personal Leadership Development Plan to support residents treated as a “PRINCIPAL in training” (North Carolina State University College of Education, 2019, p. 22; University of Washington College of Education, n.d.). These structures acknowledged that participation in administrative work did not automatically produce leadership learning. Candidates needed structured opportunities to make sense of their experiences, connect those experiences to their values and goals, and translate them into a more intentional understanding of leadership practice.

The literature clarifies why this interpretive process matters. Drake et al. (2023) found that candidates’ internship reflections supported movement from task-oriented understandings of

leadership toward more relational conceptions. Resnick (2023) similarly conceptualized principal learning as professional identity development situated within changing local expectations. In this sense, reflection is not simply a way to evaluate completed work, but a process through which candidates reconsider who they are as professional actors. This is especially important for candidates moving from teacher to principal, since the transition changes not only their responsibilities, but also their authority, relationships, and organizational position. Bush (2018) described this movement as a process of personal socialization followed by learning within a specific school context. The documents supported aspects of both forms of development, yet they rarely named the disruption that may accompany the movement from an established teacher role and identity into school leadership.

Mentoring and coaching provided the relational infrastructure for this identity work. NELP required programs to explain how mentors were selected and trained, while Illinois regulations assigned preparation providers and school-system partners shared responsibility for mentor development and candidate supervision (NPBEA, 2018; Programs for the Preparation of Principals in Illinois, 23 Ill. Adm. Code pt. 30, 2022). NAESP went further by treating mentoring as a specialized professional practice that “encourages open and reflective conversations” with the protégé (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], n.d., Competency 4). NELA differentiated the school-based mentor from an executive coach who served as an “external source of confidential and expert support” (North Carolina State University College of Education, 2019, p. 23). This separation created different relational spaces for contextual learning and candid reflection.

Recent studies demonstrate why the design of these relationships matters. Thessin et al. (2020) found that the mentor–intern partnership shaped candidates’ access to authentic leadership experiences. Lipke (2020) showed that structured mentoring could promote co-learning and deepen leadership capacity when mentors and novices examined their practice together. These findings position mentors as both gateways to leadership learning and possible gatekeepers. A mentor can expand a candidate’s access to meaningful work, but the relationship may restrict openness when the mentor also contributes to formal evaluation. The NELA model is distinctive because confidential coaching reduces the pressure to perform certainty. Across the corpus, humanized mentoring was strongest when candidates could discuss mistakes without immediately turning those mistakes into evidence of inadequate readiness.

4.1.3. Authentic Clinical Learning and Equity

Authentic clinical practice was another major humanized element. NELP required candidates to complete a “minimum of six months of concentrated (10–15 hours per week)” clinical experience involving authentic leadership activity (NPBEA, 2018, p. 30). Illinois regulations similarly required candidates to work directly with mentors by “observing, participating in, and taking the lead” in leadership tasks (Programs for the Preparation of Principals in Illinois, 23 Ill. Adm. Code § 30.40(a)(3), 2022). Faculty supervisors were also required to organize seminars in which candidates discussed issues arising from their internships. The Quality Measures toolkit emphasized carefully selected placements and individualized learning goals, indicating that clinical learning should be deliberately designed around candidate development (EDC, 2023). Program models operationalized this expectation through progressive responsibility and context-specific inquiry. Danforth candidates examined moral dilemmas and conducted equity audits, while NELA connected residency experiences with individualized

development plans. UIC combined residency with intensive coaching, and the National Aspiring Principals Fellowship allowed candidates to remain employed while undertaking leadership work in their current schools.

These findings align with research suggesting that clinical experience becomes meaningful only when internships provide candidates with well-supported opportunities to engage in consequential leadership work. Dexter et al. (2022) identified gaps between the competencies emphasized in preparation programs and the pedagogies used to connect classroom learning with field practice. Rangel et al.'s (2025) synthesis similarly showed that internship research spans program design and candidate activities, indicating considerable variation in how clinical preparation is organized. The key distinction is not between programs that have internships and programs that do not. It concerns whether candidates receive sustained access to consequential leadership work and structured assistance in making sense of that work.

Evidence comparing program designs makes this distinction more visible. Rangel et al. (2024) found that residency and traditional-program candidates both encountered authentic leadership activities, but residents reported higher levels of engagement. Bastian and Drake's (2023) large-scale study adds a more troubling dimension. They found that internship placements were often located in schools facing greater organizational and contextual challenges than non-internship schools, with these patterns especially pronounced for racially minoritized candidates. This finding complicates the assumption that authentic practice is automatically humanizing. A challenging placement may provide meaningful learning, but unequal assignment to schools with more constrained working conditions can reproduce inequity within the preparation process. Clinical experience is shaped not only by what candidates do but also by where they are placed and who receives access to supportive environments.

Equity was explicitly embedded in PSEL and NELP, while UIC and Danforth translated it into applied curricular work. UIC sought candidates committed to “disrupt inequities and advance learning opportunities” for diverse student populations (University of Illinois Chicago, College of Education, n.d., program overview). Danforth's curriculum required candidates to “conduct an equity audit of an organization” and examine moral dilemmas encountered in their work (University of Washington College of Education, n.d., curriculum section). The National Aspiring Principals Fellowship addressed equity structurally through partnerships with minority-serving institutions and an employment-compatible model. Its job-embedded residency enabled fellows to “exercise your leadership, apply your learning” in their current schools (New Leaders, n.d., “Principal Residency” section). These models treated school communities as participants in leadership and linked equity commitments with practice in authentic settings.

Previous research, however, shows that equity-related development is not straightforward. Barakat et al. (2019) found that completing leadership preparation was associated with stronger cultural beliefs and knowledge, but not with stronger cultural skills. This distinction suggests that candidates may learn the language of equity without developing the capacity to enact it. In contrast, Guillaume et al. (2020) found that graduates of a social justice-oriented program drew on program learning to enact equity-focused practices, indicating that sustained curricular coherence may help connect commitments with actions. Stone-Johnson et al. (2021) similarly questioned whether programs can develop socially just leaders without attending to candidates' readiness to recognize inequity. Rasmussen and Raskin (2023) found that making race central

across curriculum and pedagogy strengthened candidates' preparation for racial-equity leadership. Jackson (2025) also found that program quality was the strongest predictor of graduates' perceived preparedness to lead for equity. Yet Khemakhem (2026), using data from 54 U.S. universities, found no significant difference in several dimensions of cultural intelligence between program starters and completers. Together, these studies suggest that adding equity content is insufficient. Equity becomes a humanized curricular practice when it is embedded across the program and connected to repeated opportunities for implementation.

4.1.4. Continuity and Accountability

Several documents framed principal development as extending beyond certification. PSEL connected preparation with induction, while the Quality Measures toolkit evaluated graduates' entry into leadership positions (EDC, 2023; NPBEA, 2015). Title II defined meaningful professional development as "sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused" and allowed funds to support principal induction and mentoring (U.S. Department of Education, 2025, p. 11). Its description of school-leader residencies also required "ongoing support from an experienced and effective principal mentor" (p. 45). Florida required limited assistance during graduates' first two years, while Danforth and UIC extended coaching into early principal practice (Florida Department of Education [FDOE], 2025; University of Illinois Chicago, College of Education, n.d.; University of Washington College of Education, n.d.). Across these documents, certification appeared less as a marker of completed learning than as one point within a longer transition into school leadership.

Massachusetts provided the clearest induction model by describing a program that "develops, supports, accelerates, and sustains" effective and equitable leadership (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MDESE], 2022, p. 8). Its guiding principles defined induction as a "learning continuum from principal preparation through selection, placement, development, evaluation, and retention" (p. 8). This language connected preservice preparation with the organizational conditions novice principals encounter after appointment and assigned responsibility for that transition to district and state leaders, not only to individual participants. The handbook therefore positioned early principal development as a shared institutional responsibility, rather than as an individual effort to manage the first years of leadership alone.

This emphasis on continuity aligns with research showing that early principalship introduces developmental demands that preparation cannot fully anticipate. Kılınç and Gümüş's (2021) systematic review identified socialization and mentorship as central concerns in research on novice principals. Watts's (2023) review concluded that beginning principals benefit from broader support networks, not only traditional one-to-one mentoring. Rogers and VanGronigen (2023), however, found that only about half of U.S. states required any form of principal induction. This finding mirrors the pattern in the documents: continuity is valued, but not consistently guaranteed. Whether a novice principal receives sustained support depends substantially on location, policy infrastructure, and institutional capacity.

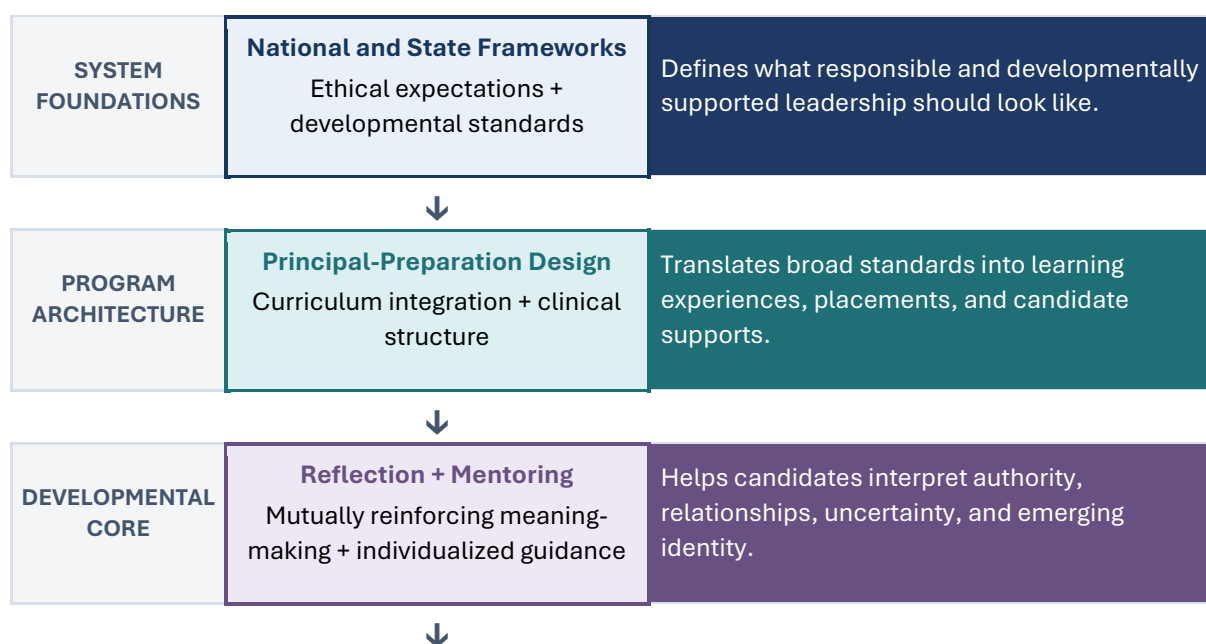
The final tension concerns accountability. Standards can protect candidates from weak preparation by requiring programs to provide meaningful clinical experiences and evidence of candidate learning. However, they also privilege development that can be documented through performance evidence. NELP explicitly identifies performance-based measures as central to

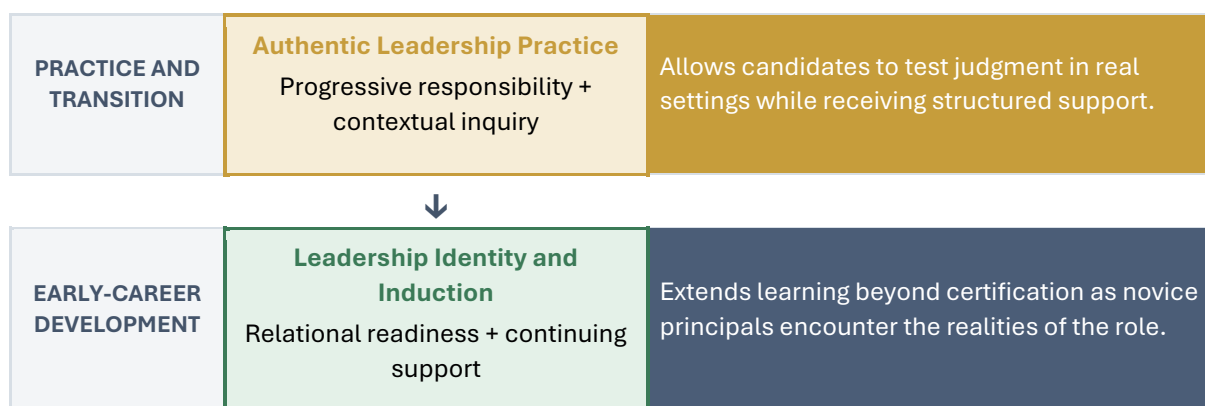
candidate evaluation, while Illinois requires candidates to achieve formal competency ratings during the internship (NPBEA, 2018; Programs for the Preparation of Principals in Illinois, 23 Ill. Adm. Code § 30.45, 2022). Other aspects of becoming a principal, such as emotional readiness, professional belonging, confidence, and identity development, are less easily captured through such assessments. The documents therefore humanized preparation within a system that continued to prioritize demonstrable competence. Candidates were encouraged to reflect, but their reflections could become evidence for evaluation. Mentors were expected to create trust, but they could also judge readiness. Authentic practice offered space for exploration, but it also generated assessment artifacts.

Overall, it appears that U.S. principal preparation is meaningfully but incompletely humanized. The documents that most explicitly addressed human-centered preparation connected sustained relationships with authentic practice and recognized that becoming a principal involves a transformation of not only professional responsibility, but also identity and authority. Recent research supports these features while showing that their influence depends on program coherence, placement quality, as well as sustained support. Humanized preparation therefore cannot be inferred from the presence of mentoring or an internship alone. It depends on whether these structures provide equitable access to meaningful leadership work and protected opportunities to interpret experience. Taken together, the findings suggest that humanized principal preparation develops through alignment among policy expectations, program design, relational learning, and authentic leadership practice, while remaining shaped by the tension between developmental support and competency-based accountability. Figure 1 presents this process.

FIGURE 1.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF HUMANIZED PRINCIPAL PREPARATION
From Policy Expectations to Sustained Leadership Development





Source: Authors' conceptual model based on study findings

5. Conclusion

Our study shows that humanized principal preparation in the United States is best understood as a career developmental orientation that connects professional learning with the lived transition into school leadership. Across the analyzed standards and program materials, candidates were expected to develop ethical judgment and relational capacity while learning to interpret complex organizational situations. The documents and program models that most explicitly addressed this transition created conditions in which aspiring principals could test emerging leadership identities through authentic practice and receive guidance responsive to their contexts. Humanization was therefore most visible when preparation recognized that becoming a principal involves a change in professional authority and self-understanding, not simply the completion of certification requirements. This perspective shifts attention from what candidates can demonstrate at the end of a program to how they learn to exercise leadership responsibly within relationships.

At the same time, the analysis reveals that these developmental conditions are not consistently secured across the preparation system. Mentoring may support honest reflection, yet its evaluative function can limit openness. Clinical experiences may expose candidates to consequential leadership work, yet unequal placements can produce uneven opportunities for growth. Humanized preparation therefore depends less on the presence of particular program components than on how those components are designed and experienced. A coherent approach would protect spaces for developmental uncertainty while extending support into the early years of principalship. Such a shift would allow principal preparation to evaluate readiness without reducing leadership development to visible performance alone, while also recognizing that sustainable leadership emerges through continued learning in context.

A broader implication is that effectiveness in one professional role should not be assumed to translate automatically into effectiveness in a leadership role. In education, this means that being a strong teacher does not necessarily mean being prepared to become a principal. The transition requires a different configuration of skills, including ethical judgment, relational authority, organizational sensemaking, communication, conflict navigation, and the ability to support the learning and well-being of an entire school community. Humanized principal preparation can therefore help clarify what aspiring leaders need in order to move from individual professional expertise into leadership that supports the success and thriving of schools.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

Our study contributes to principal-preparation theory by conceptualizing humanized preparation as a relational and identity-centered developmental process. Prior research has shown that principal learning involves identity development, reflection, mentoring, and clinical experience. Our contribution is to examine how these elements are represented together within the formal documents that structure principal preparation. Our conceptualization extends competency-based frameworks by showing that becoming a principal involves changes in how candidates understand themselves and exercise authority within local professional contexts (Resnick, 2023). Reflection is theoretically significant because it connects clinical experience with the construction of a leadership identity, helping candidates move from task-centered views of administration toward more relational understandings of leadership (Drake et al., 2023). Mentoring likewise functions as more than a delivery mechanism for practical knowledge; its developmental value depends on the quality of the mentor–candidate relationship and the opportunities it creates for authentic leadership participation (Thessin et al., 2020).

Our analysis further shows that the formal inclusion of humanized components should be distinguished from their developmental quality. The existence of an internship or mentoring requirement does not ensure that candidates experience meaningful support, particularly when placement conditions and access to effective mentors vary (Bastian & Drake, 2023). In addition, preparation cannot be considered fully humanized when candidates are trained to support the well-being of school communities without comparable attention to their own emotional readiness for principalship (Mahfouz & Richardson, 2021). By locating identity development and candidate well-being within standards, program materials, and systems of assessment, our study shows how humanized preparation is both supported and constrained by existing preparation structures. Humanized principal preparation therefore depends not only on what programs include, but also on whether their structures provide psychologically safe opportunities for candidates to interpret uncertainty and develop sustainable leadership identities.

5.2. Implications for Practice

Principal-preparation providers should design mentoring and clinical learning as connected components of a coherent developmental curriculum. Reflection on identity and authority should be integrated across coursework and field experiences, instead of being confined to an internship assignment. Leggett et al. (2023) found that coherent program redesign required collaboration with professional partners and explicit alignment between core program commitments and candidate learning experiences. District–university partnerships can strengthen this coherence by connecting academic preparation with the conditions candidates will encounter in schools. Evidence from a sustained partnership model indicates that long-term collaboration can support contextually relevant preparation and continuing assistance for developing school leaders (Williams et al., 2022). Building on this work, our analysis suggests that coherence should be understood not only as alignment among courses, standards, and field experiences, but also as alignment around the developmental transition into leadership. Programs should therefore establish shared expectations with districts for mentor preparation and meaningful leadership responsibilities. They should also provide developmental spaces where candidates can examine uncertainty without treating every challenge as evidence of inadequate readiness.

5.3. Implications for Policy

State approval and accreditation policies should assess the developmental quality of principal preparation, not only the formal presence of required components. Abdelrahman et al. (2022) found that strong university–district partnership policies were significantly associated with stronger internship policies, suggesting that policy coherence across institutional actors can influence the quality of candidates’ clinical preparation. State frameworks should consequently establish clearer expectations for partnership responsibilities and the integration of internships with coursework. However, mandates should be accompanied by sufficient institutional capacity. Clement et al. (2022) found that successful program redesign depends on technical resources and relational conditions within preparation organizations. Policies that require mentoring or program redesign without supporting implementation may therefore produce procedural compliance without meaningful humanization. Our findings extend this policy discussion by showing that humanized preparation requires attention to the conditions under which required components are enacted. Accountability frameworks should examine whether candidates receive sustained developmental support and equitable access to authentic leadership work, rather than treating the presence of an internship, mentor, or performance assessment as sufficient evidence of developmental preparation.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is limited by its reliance on publicly available standards, policy documents, program descriptions, and professional-development materials. These documents provide valuable insight into how humanized principal preparation is formally described, but they cannot fully capture how candidates experience preparation in practice. A program may emphasize reflection and mentoring in its written materials, yet candidates may experience these supports differently depending on the mentor, internship setting, or institutional resources available to them. The selected documents also represent only a portion of the principal-preparation landscape in the United States, so the findings should not be interpreted as reflecting every state or program. In addition, the documents were created for different purposes. Regulatory texts often focused on requirements and accountability, while program materials provided more detailed descriptions of candidate support. These differences influenced which humanized elements were most visible in the analysis.

Future research should therefore move beyond formal documents and listen directly to the people experiencing principal preparation. Interviews with candidates and novice principals could provide deeper insight into whether mentoring and reflection create genuine support or are experienced mainly as program requirements. Longitudinal research could follow aspiring leaders from preparation into their first years of principalship, allowing researchers to examine how confidence and professional identity develop over time. Comparative studies across states and program models could also explore why some candidates receive stronger mentoring or more meaningful clinical opportunities than others. Particular attention should be given to candidates whose backgrounds or professional circumstances may shape their access to supportive preparation. Such research could help determine whether the humanized commitments expressed in policy and program documents are experienced as meaningful support during the demanding transition into school leadership.

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Conflict of Interest

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Data supporting the conclusions of this study can be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

AI Use

The authors used ChatGPT, GPT-5.5 Thinking, and Microsoft 365 Copilot to support manuscript revision, including wording, structure, transitions, and clarification of the study's contribution. The authors reviewed and revised all AI-assisted text and remain fully responsible for the manuscript's analysis, interpretations, citations, and conclusions. The authors further affirm that all cited sources are real, accurately referenced, and have been verified by the authors. Full responsibility for the content and integrity of this article remains with the authors.

Ethics Statement

This study was based on qualitative analysis of publicly available documents and did not involve human participants, identifiable private information, or direct interaction with individuals. Ethical approval and informed consent were therefore not required. The authors conducted the study in accordance with applicable ethical standards for document-based research.

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