

Fair across the Board? Relating Teacher Commitment to Teachers' Perceptions of Principal

Versus Assistant Principal Leadership

Jennifer L. Nelson

Assistant Professor, Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

[Jln2115@illinois.edu](mailto:Jln2115@illinois.edu)

334 Education Building; 1310 S. Sixth St.; Champaign, IL 61820

Joonkil Ahn

Assistant Professor

Department of Educational Policy Studies & Practice

University of Arizona

[ahnj@arizona.edu](mailto:ahnj@arizona.edu)

Karen A. Hegtvedt

Professor of Sociology

Emory University

[khegtve@emory.edu](mailto:khegtve@emory.edu)

**Short title:** Teachers' perceptions of principal versus assistant principal leadership

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# TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Little is known about how teachers view the leadership of assistant principals in comparison to that of principals, especially in relationship to teachers' work outcomes. We examine whether a gap exists between teachers' perceptions of fairness from principals and assistant principals, and whether this gap is associated with teachers' commitment to their school.

**Research Methods:** We employ mixed methods with a converging evidence model to understand the relationship between teachers' perception gaps and commitment outcomes. We analyze interview data from 98 teachers across five high schools in one metropolitan area in the U.S. South to describe these gaps, and analyze survey data from 354 teachers from these same schools using structural equation modeling.

**Findings:** Our qualitative analysis uses a typology to show examples of typical work scenarios where a teacher perceives a gap or no gap in fairness. Results from our quantitative data analysis suggest teachers express more commitment when they assess as fair (i.e., unbiased) the performance feedback from assistant principals rather than head principals. Yet, teacher commitment hinges on greater considerate interpersonal treatment from principals than from assistant principals. Overall, gaps in administrator fairness are associated with lower average teacher commitment.

**Implications for Research and Practice:** Our investigation advances understandings of school leadership by clarifying role distinctions between principals and assistant principals that go beyond task types and considering expectations teachers hold of different school administrators. These perception differences matter as they appear associated with levels of teacher commitment.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

**Keywords:** assistant principals, principals, organizational justice, workplace attitudes, teacher commitment, mixed methods

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## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

### Fair across the Board? Relating Teacher Commitment to Teachers' Perceptions of Principal Versus Assistant Principal Leadership

Most research in educational leadership focuses on the practices of head principals and their effect on a range of school outcomes: student achievement (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008), staff development (Youngs & Kings, 2002), teachers' work attitudes (Price, 2015), and building capacity through human capital decisions (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). A review of the past 20 years of research on principal effects has highlighted the importance of principals' instructionally-focused interactions with teachers, along with their contributions to building a positive school climate and managing teachers as personnel (Grissom et al., 2021). However, instructional leadership and personnel management also fall under the umbrella of assistant principals' (APs) responsibilities (i.e., tasks they are expected to perform) (Searby et al., 2017). Indeed, unlike other organizational settings where workers report to a single manager, teachers in larger schools may report to both the head principal and APs.

Goldring and colleagues (2021) emphasize the importance of understanding the assistant principalship more in-depth, given the position's prevalence among school administrators in the U.S. They note that while APs take on a variety of tasks, research lags on how they are prepared, how their tasks relate to their school context, and what practices (i.e., ways of fulfilling a task) are most effective in ensuring success in their endeavors. Moreover, Goldring and colleagues' review of 16 peer-reviewed and two unpublished studies on APs conveys how AP practices and performance are important to teacher outcomes, including the extent of support teachers feel their administrators provide (Keesor, 2005) and teachers' ratings of school climate (Woo, 2020). Nonetheless, much remains unknown about whether or how such influences on teacher attitudes may contribute to greater teacher retention (Goldring et al., 2021). Further, despite emerging

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

studies in education research on APs' distinctive job tasks and the influence of their practices on teacher outcomes (e.g., Woo, 2020), little work explicitly compares the influence of APs on school or teacher outcomes with that of principals in general, let alone about how teachers perceive the fair management practices of different school administrators. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to provide evidence of how APs shape teachers' commitment to their school, and whether this influence is similar to or different from the principal's influence. This knowledge will advance the field's understanding of how teachers experience educational leadership beyond—and in direct comparison to—the teacher-head principal relationship.

Some organization-oriented theory in education research identifies potential differences between the head principal and AP roles and how teachers perceive them. For instance, distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006) grapples with questions of how multiple parties in a school, beyond the principal only, enact leadership practices and endeavor to make them compatible. This perspective, however, falls short of emphasizing how leaders accomplish both technical and value-laden aspects of leading organizations (Tian et al., 2016). Broader organizational theory, however, emphasizes how leaders handle such multifaceted roles. Specifically, Selznick (1957) argues in his foundational book, *Leadership in Administration*, that leaders' roles span both technical and value-laden aspects of leading organizations within a system of multiple parties. A role is “a way of behaving associated with a defined position in a social system,” and all roles carry expectations of behavior (Selznick, 1957, 82). Others' expectations for the occupants of a particular role shape the tasks that they take on (Biddle, 1979); for example, people expect those in the parental role to feed, clothe, and protect children. Selznick argues that within a hierarchical organization, authorities' ranks and dependence on those in higher positions shape their role, highlighting the tensions that authorities may

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

experience. For instance, Selznick describes a foreperson, whose challenge is to exercise authority as a representative of upper management while also gaining commitment from subordinates through empathetic communication.

The insights provided by Selznick echo the challenges of school principals, who work in emotionally charged, highly visible settings with constrained authority (Lortie, 2009). That is, in efforts to foster cohesion, collaboration, and community, the principal role requires a strong public face to external audiences and a positive school culture within (Matthews & Crow, 2003, 13).<sup>1</sup> The historical role of the AP was not to co-lead with the principal, but to relieve the principal of operational tasks (such as building maintenance, student discipline, and attendance) so the principal could perform instructional ones (such as curriculum, student learning, and teacher supervision) (Kelly, 1987). While the AP role has expanded to include a supervisory role over teachers' instruction, AP roles still focus on operational tasks such as school management and student affairs, including paperwork, student discipline, and extracurricular activities (Matthews & Crow, 2003; Sun, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, APs still perceive limits to the kinds of culture setting they can do (Marshall & Mitchell, 1991).

Scholars argue that leadership is “equal parts ‘poetry and plumbing’” (March & Weil, 2005, cited in Besharov and Khurana 2015, 57; see also Selznick, 1957). As applied to the case of school administrators, the role of the principal constitutes the “poetry.” The poetry represents

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas school *climate* is commonly defined as the “tone [and] atmosphere of trust established by the principal” (Price, 2015, 42), school *culture* differs in that it refers more broadly to the unique routines, relational patterns, and meaning-making processes that occur in that school (Diehl & Golann, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Consistent with Kelly (1987) and Moyer and Goldring (2022), we conceptualize student discipline tasks as primarily an operational task of an educational leader, though working with students in an effort to influence their conduct does contain, secondarily, an element of negotiating emotions and cultural norms.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

cultural/institutional leadership, involving tasks like establishing a mission for the school, motivating teachers to set and reach goals, and creating meaning for school members. In contrast, the role of the AP is to take on tasks focused on operational/technical leadership, which represents the “plumbing.” The plumbing includes tasks of budgeting, facilities, student activities, and practical aspects of instruction, all of which are generally operational and/or technical in nature (e.g., see Matthews & Crow, 2003). Following Selznick (1957), we use the term *technical* to encompass all such management tasks related to efficiency, rationality, and administration, in contrast to tasks that tend to the organization’s culture, politics, and values (Besharov & Khurana, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Expectations associated with these distinct roles, if held by teachers, could influence what kind of treatment and behavior teachers anticipate from their principals and APs, thereby shaping their commitment to the school.

We ground our work in the social psychological framework of organizational justice, a central perspective on workplace dynamics that generally refers to the extent to which workers perceive fairness in how organizations are led and managed (see Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015). While concerns with organizational justice in educational settings have long focused on allocation of educational resources and pedagogical practices (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016), attention has grown to include consideration of the effects of the perceived fairness of a school leader on educators’ job satisfaction (e.g., Elma, 2013), trust (e.g., Hoy & Tarter, 2004; Nelson et al., 2019), organizational identification (e.g., Terzi et al. 2017), and organizational commitment (Masterson, 2001). We expand on this literature by addressing the complexity of leadership in larger schools, focusing on the extent to which head and APs are perceived to uphold two types

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, we use the terms technical/operational and management role synonymously, all instances of the “plumbing” of leadership. Similarly, we use the terms instructional, value-laden, and cultural/institutional synonymously, all instances of the “poetry” of leadership.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

of justice—procedural and interpersonal—in their encounters with teachers. We ask the following research questions:

1. To what extent do teachers perceive differences in the fairness with which their principal versus AP treats them concerning teacher evaluation processes and daily workplace social interactions?
2. What is the independent impact of fairness assessments of the principal and AP on teachers' commitment to their organization?
3. How does any existing “fairness gap” between the two leaders (i.e., the relative levels of procedural and interpersonal justice, as rated by individual teachers) relate to teachers' organizational commitment?

To address our questions, we use original interview data from 98 teachers and survey data from 354 teachers across five public high schools in one metropolitan area in the U.S. We employ a descriptive qualitative analysis to illustrate how teachers perceive the fairness of their administrators' behavior as they go about their daily work lives in schools, and structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the relationships between teachers' perceptions of the fairness of different administrators and teachers' organizational commitment.

### **Organizational Justice in the Work of Principals and Assistant Principals**

The organizational justice framework considers how employees' perceptions of fairness in the workplace affect outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and the like. As such, it is applicable to educational settings. In what follows, we review both general theoretical and empirical work in this tradition and how studies have evolved to consider the impact of various leaders in educational settings.

### **Organizational Justice: A Framework for Assessing Leadership**



## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

The organizational justice framework draws from a social psychological approach to understanding individuals' perceptions of and reactions to injustice in social life. It encompasses four dimensions of justice: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational. We focus on the dimensions of justice that most directly highlight concerns about relationship dynamics among individuals embedded in a group: procedural and interpersonal justice (Bobocel & Gosse, 2015).<sup>4</sup> Procedural justice refers to the consistency, impartiality, and correctability of evaluation procedures applied across organization members (Bobocel & Gosse, 2015). Interpersonal justice denotes the consideration, truthfulness, kindness, dignity, and concern shown to subordinates by managers (Colquitt, 2001; Moorman, 1991; Jost & Kay, 2010). Prior research shows that perceptions of these types of justice, especially procedural justice, are associated with commitment outcomes (i.e., people's identification with and choice to continue employment in the organization for which they work) (e.g., McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992; O'Neill & Cotton, 2017; Wayne et al., 2002). Perceiving that leaders deliver procedural or interpersonal justice makes workers feel like they are valued members of the group, which, in turn, increases their desire to stay in the group as represented by their organizational commitment (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Studies in educational settings likewise reinforce the relationship between perceived organizational justice and organizational commitment. These studies usually include all subtypes of organizational justice, with informational justice being the subtype least represented, possibly because leaders providing explanations is also conceptualized as a dimension of interpersonal

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<sup>4</sup> As distributive justice typically regards pay, which for teachers is largely set outside the school level (i.e., by the district or the state), it theoretically does not pertain to analysis contrasting perceptions of head and assistant principal leadership actions. And, while potentially applicable, we did not have complete data on informational justice measures from our sample.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

justice (Colquitt, 2001). For example, Masterson (2001) shows that students are more likely to take another class (a form of commitment) with an instructor who they perceive treated them and their classmates fairly (i.e., enacted interpersonal justice). Focusing on faculty members' perceptions of "superiors" at their vocational colleges, Guh et al. (2013) show that organizational justice (a latent factor consisting of perceived distributive, procedural, and interpersonal justice) positively affects affective commitment to the institution. In educational settings, research has explored fairness perceptions between teachers and principals, finding that both fair interpersonal treatment and evaluation practices are related to more positive teacher outcomes of increased trust in coworkers (Nelson et al., 2019). Another study found that principals' perceptions of central office administrators' evaluation practices as fair were associated with increased principal job satisfaction (Nelson et al., 2021). Our present study advances this research by specifically considering that, in many schools, teachers report to both the head principal and APs (i.e., different levels of administrators). Here, we examine how differences—if any—in justice perceptions of multiple authorities affect teacher outcomes.

### **Beyond the Head Principal: Considering the Role of the Assistant Principal**

The past four decades of research in educational leadership provides a strong set of insights about multiple ways in which the principal impacts school outcomes, ranging from school climate, teacher development, and student achievement. First, in terms of how principals affect school climates (as reflected by teacher attitudes), Price (2015) found that principal communication that conveys shared expectations within a school faculty is associated with the teacher outcome of greater teacher commitment, as measured by intention to stay in their school. Second, research has consistently evidenced that the *direct* impact of the principal's leadership on student achievement is weak (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008) and largely

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

mediated by and linked to within-school factors, such as school culture (Bosker et al., 2000; Murphy et al., 2007) and teaching practice (Day et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2011). Indeed, in a review of 20 years of research on how principals affect student achievement, Grissom et al. (2021) emphasize the *indirect* effects of principals on students, through their effects on their hiring, retaining, developing, and managing teachers in their schools. Grissom and colleagues (2021) articulate four practices of effective principals, which include being focused on instruction in their interactions with teachers, as well as being involved in building a positive school climate. In the same vein, Tan et al.'s (2020) second-order meta-analysis of research on principal leadership effects suggest that principals mostly influence students by developing staff capacity, indicating a larger effect size than other school outcomes.

More recently, as leadership is increasingly conceptualized as an organization-wide practice instead of traits of a single person (i.e., the principal) (Bowers, 2020; Kelley & Halverson, 2012; Little, 2003; Spillane & Diamond, 2007), studies have begun to examine the nature of the gaps perceived and experienced by multiple parties (e.g., teachers, principals). For example, research suggests that principals often report higher assessment of their own leadership than their teacher colleagues' evaluation of the principal's practice (Brezicha et al., 2019; Goldring et al., 2015; Park & Ham, 2016; Urick & Bowers, 2019). Ahn et al. (2021) show the incongruency between teachers' perceptions, represented at both the individual level and school level, and principals' perceptions of organization-wide leadership practices. This body of literature has also consistently revealed that leadership effectiveness on school outcomes is more accurately predicted by teacher assessments of leader effectiveness than that by principals themselves (Printy & Liu, 2020). Moreover, these gaps in perceived leader effectiveness are often negatively associated with teacher outcomes, such as teacher collaboration, self-efficacy,

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

and job satisfaction (Ham et al., 2015; Park & Ham, 2016; Wang et al., 2019). Spillane et al. (2003) further show that teachers regard not only their principals, but also other teachers in their schools as leaders, depending on how the different parties deploy the resources they oversee. In all, these extant findings warrant closer attention to the nature of leadership perception gaps and their potential influence on school outcomes (teacher outcomes included). For instance, given the teacher-principal disparities in perceptions of leadership, other potential disparities in perceptions may also shape how teachers perceive the administrative teams in their schools—with implications for teachers' outcomes in those schools.

At the same time, scholars of educational leadership have begun to take greater interest in—and learn more about—APs as particular school administrators. APs' job tasks, preparation, and contributions to student achievement, school climate, and culture are distinct from those of principals (Woo, 2020). For instance, principals perceive that the work of APs is invaluable for meeting student needs (e.g., Fuller et al., 2018). Additionally, culturally responsive school leadership models recognize that APs' job tasks around student discipline make them especially important school personnel for creating inclusive learning environments (Clayton & Goodwin, 2015). Some evidence also suggests that enhancing APs' instructional coaching abilities is associated with increases in student reading scores (Master et al., 2020). In addition, the prominence of the AP role in schools merits greater attention in studies of school leadership. About half of schools in the U.S. have one or more APs, and their ranks have doubled over the past 30 years (to about 81,000 in 2015-2016) (Goldring et al., 2021). Moreover, the role often acts as a stepping stone to becoming a principal (Goldring et al., 2021).

The paucity of research on APs hampers the ability of education research to inform how to strengthen the role, in terms of role preparation, assignment of responsibilities, and

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

collaborations among administrators to create productive learning climates for students and their career mobility prospects. A few recent studies address some of these needs by highlighting different dependencies that APs have on principals. In one study, Bartanen and colleagues (2021) draw on administrative data in Tennessee and Missouri to show that AP mobility (e.g., exits from school administration, or promotions to head principal) is strongly attached to their head principal's own turnover decisions. And in a study of APs in the state of Tennessee, Moyer and Goldring (2022) reveal that principals who delegate more instructional leadership tasks to APs, and interact with APs more frequently, enhance APs' positive attitudes regarding their experience of the evaluation process. This study also gave some insight into the different leadership tasks with which APs are charged: on average, in their sample, APs spent 29% of their time on instructional leadership tasks (e.g., teacher evaluation, leading professional development, and curriculum matters); 46% on student affairs tasks (e.g., student discipline, student-related meetings, bus duty); and 25% on school management tasks (e.g., hiring, scheduling, budgeting, parent and central office interactions). These findings point to enduring tensions in the AP role. While findings in recent studies of APs suggest that they are mostly satisfied with their roles (Goldring et al., 2021) and do engage in some instructional leadership tasks, unlike APs in the past (Kelly, 1987), their roles remain misaligned to performance expectations held for principals that are often applied to APs as well—signaling that their work is more multifaceted than institutions recognize it to be (Moyer & Goldring, 2022).

The APs role may differ in a variety of ways from the principal's role, especially at the high school level where the number of APs may be larger (Woo, 2020), making the division of leadership tasks—such as instructional leadership, student affairs, and school management—more complicated. Moreover, coordination between roles may be an added challenge. Most of

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

the APs in Moyer and Goldring's (2022) sample had few (i.e., 3-5, on a scale of 0-11+) interactions daily with their principal—which implies that while there exists potential for the two administrators to be aligned in their communication and goals, they may not be. Moreover, while research on APs to date suggests that their work involves more operational tasks (e.g., student affairs, school management) and fewer technical (e.g., instructional) tasks than principals, whether distinct patterns emerge in the cultural/institutional tasks compared to operational/technical tasks (i.e., the “poetry” and “plumbing” dimensions of leadership, respectively [March & Weil, 2005, 98]) taken up by each leader remains unknown.

In this paper, we do not suggest that any single leader in a school is expected to do all the cultural/institutional work, while another is expected to carry out all the operational/technical work. Indeed, Selznick (1957) is clear that such a division of labor is not a viable arrangement of leadership tasks. Rather, building on Selznick's emphasis on *roles*, and applying insights from organizational justice, we consider how teachers' perceptions of the fairness of each leader in their school represent the fulfillment of the behavioral expectations they hold for the roles of each leader. We interpret Selznick's functional (i.e., operational/technical) leadership role to be aligned with the evaluative tasks undertaken by authorities (assessed in terms of procedural justice), and his empathy and culture-based leadership role to be aligned with leaders' interpersonal treatment of their subordinates (assessed in terms of interpersonal justice).

Existing research on educational leadership tends to focus more on leaders' tasks and less on their roles (e.g., Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Moyer & Goldring, 2022), and rarely considers how teachers perceive the leadership of head principals in comparison to APs, let alone the consequences of differences in such perceptions for teacher outcomes. Here, we ask whether a gap exists between the perceptions of the two roles and to what extent the gap influences teacher

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

outcomes. Specifically, we focus on how fair—in terms of procedures of performance evaluation and interpersonal treatment—teachers perceive their head and APs to be, and how the difference in such perceptions affects teachers' commitment to their school.

We employ a mixed methods design to achieve a more complete understanding of our leading research question than would have been possible with a single type of data. First, by conducting interviews with teachers in our research settings, we learn how teachers *experience and describe* the fairness with which their principal or AP treats them in everyday work life, in their own words. Second, our survey data, drawn from a larger sample of teachers in the same research settings, uncover teacher perceptions across many respondents and allows us to relate these perceptions to teacher self-reports of their commitment to their school. We adopt a convergent mixed methods design (Greene, 2007; Hong et al., 2017) by which we both gathered and analyzed the data types independently and synthesized them in the discussion. In what follows, we introduce our mixed methods approach and the research setting. Then, we describe our qualitative methodology and analysis approach, followed by our results. We turn next to the quantitative methodology and analyses producing our findings from the survey.

### **Mixed Methods Approach**

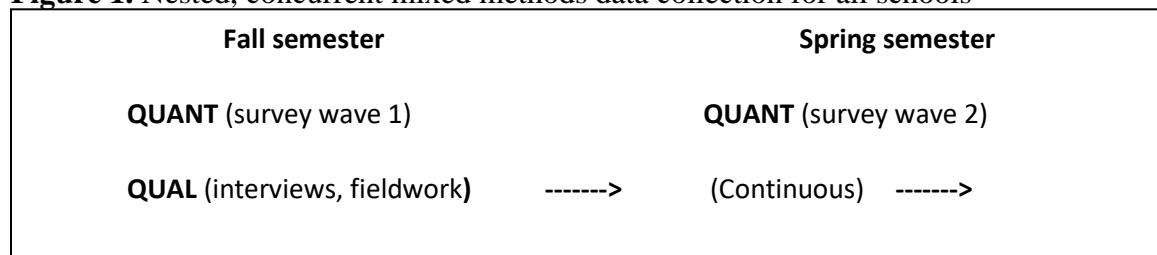
Mixed method research designs offer the opportunity to substantiate researchers' understanding of patterns by triangulating evidence across data types, compensate for weaknesses of some data types by complementing them with other data types, or expand the scope of inquiry within a single study (Greene, 2007; Small, 2011). Consistent with Small's (2011) guidance on mixed methods, we employ complementary data types (i.e., interview and survey) that facilitate answering our research questions. While the qualitative interviews offer a case-based, interpretive orientation to data analysis, they do not offer the variable-based

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

approach to describing the patterns within a broader sample. Similarly, while our quantitative measures of procedural and interpersonal justice help align our findings with existing studies that use similar measures, these measures on their own lack detailed examples of leadership practices experienced by respondents that inform their view of administrators' fairness.

Because our inquiry sought to understand teachers' perceptions of the same administrators across data types, we nested our design so that multiple data types were collected from the same teachers in the same organizations. As detailed below, all participants were invited to participate in the survey, and a subsample of those teachers were selected and invited for interviews. Because time frame issues were largely irrelevant, we used a largely concurrent design to collect this data within the year of study. A visual depiction of our mixed methods approach appears in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Nested, concurrent mixed methods data collection for all schools



*Note.*

*Wave 1 and wave 2 of the surveys were identical questions. In our qualitative analysis, we include interview and fieldwork data from across the schoolyear.*

### Research Settings

This study draws on data from a larger study about how the demographic composition of teaching faculty (by race, experience, and certificate background) affects teachers' work attitudes, collaboration behaviors at work, and perceptions of school administrators (Nelson, 2018). Accordingly, chosen school sites offered contrasting faculty demographics and capitalized on where the first author had the greatest degree of research access—an important consideration



## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

in case studies for enhancing data quality (Spradley, 1980). The included schools were part of two school districts that represent common conditions in urban and suburban school settings, as described in Table 1. The research sites are in one metropolitan area in the U.S. South, and are all high schools, which typically feature larger faculty and administrative teams than elementary or middle schools. APs' roles in each school in this study were somewhat distinct, but almost all the APs across sites engaged in student discipline and teacher evaluation work (see Table 1). As such, these are appropriate sites for investigating AP roles and practices and how teachers perceive them.

### **Qualitative Methods**

#### **Data**

To understand whether and in what ways teachers perceived differences in the fairness with which their principal versus AP treated them concerning teacher evaluation processes and daily workplace social encounters, we relied on interview data with 98 teachers across these five high schools. Teacher interviewees were selected for recruitment using a case-pair matching strategy (Nielsen, 2016), resulting in a sample that was balanced across schools by teacher race, certification background, and experience teaching. All teachers invited to interviews agreed to participate. The resulting sample was 35% Black, 60% White, 2% Latino/a, and 3% Asian, as well as 25% male and 75% female, with an average teaching experience of four years in the school and nine years total. By comparison, the population of teachers in the five schools was about 35% Black, 61% White, and 4% Latino/a or Asian, and 39% male with an average of two to four years of experience in their school and 10-15 years teaching experience total. The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, in which the first author elicited examples of participants' typical and recent interactions with colleagues, both fellow teachers, their principal, and their

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

**Table 1.** School and school personnel characteristics

School	District	Total teachers	% White teachers (% Black)	% Female teachers	% low-income students*	Number of assistant principals (APs)	Each AP's roles
School 1	Urban	89	29% (67%)	61%	100	3	Student discipline and teaching evaluations, by grade: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9<sup>th</sup> grade, plus testing and curriculum</li> <li>• 10<sup>th</sup> grade, plus buses</li> <li>• 11<sup>th</sup>-12 grade, plus textbooks</li> </ul>
School 2	Urban	93	36% (58%)	53%	100	3	Student discipline and teaching evaluations, by grade: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9<sup>th</sup> grade academy;</li> <li>• 10<sup>th</sup> grade, plus attendance;</li> <li>• 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade</li> </ul>
School 3	Suburban	97	90% (10%)	70%	18	4	Student discipline and teaching evaluations, by grade: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10<sup>th</sup> grade;</li> <li>• 11<sup>th</sup> grade, plus textbooks;</li> <li>• 12<sup>th</sup> grade</li> </ul> One AP focused on attendance and athletics
School 4	Suburban	67	81% (15%)	63%	59	2	discipline, teaching evaluations, all grades (both AP's)
School 5	Suburban	40	90% (10%)	58%	23	1	Curriculum and instruction, teaching evaluations

\*Low-income measured by eligibility for federal free or reduced-price lunch.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

APs (a list of interview questions appears in the Appendix). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. In addition, the first author observed faculty and departmental meetings at the schools over the course of one academic year, 2014-2015, as a non-participant observer.

Fieldnotes from these observations were included for analysis when the meetings featured interactions between teachers, principals, and/or APs.

### **Analysis**

The qualitative analysis explores the characterizations and patterns that emerged from the different possible principal/AP fairness gaps.<sup>5</sup> We first demarcated our qualitative dataset from all transcripts and fieldnotes for this analysis. In all, 612 excerpts from the transcripts, or “data segments,” were flagged by the first author as pertaining to teachers talking about their administrators positively or negatively. The first author then used a protocol-based coding scheme that reflected the established survey constructs of justice and their dimensions (e.g., procedural-consistent; procedural-feedback; interactional-considers viewpoint, etc.). From this first basic analysis, the first author identified that 302 of these data segments pertained to such instances of justice. Of the justice-related data segments, 143 contained information about teachers' comparative assessments of their head principals *and* APs. These 143 segments became our focal qualitative data, as they demonstrated instances of when there were or were not gaps between the perceived fairness of the administrators.

To ensure intercoder agreement in the finer-graded coding within this final dataset, we adopt an approach like that described by Campbell et al. (2013), where one knowledgeable coder first codes all in-depth transcripts and fieldnotes with an established coding scheme. Then, the

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<sup>5</sup> Because our qualitative data do not compensate in a similar way for our quantitative measures of commitment, we focus our qualitative analysis on the fairness patterns.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

other two members of the research team coded a subsample of the data segments using the first author's coding scheme, and the three authors discussed and reconciled any differences in their coding. In our dataset, the entire research team coded a common subsample of 15 segments, representing 45 inter-coding pairs. In total, we disagreed in 6 of these 45 pairs, representing a disagreement proportion of 13%. For example, we initially disagreed about calling instances of administrators ignoring or rarely seeing teachers as being an instance of procedural injustice, along the dimension of evaluation frequency, or interpersonal injustice, along the dimension of a lack of consideration. After discussion, we agreed this was an instance of the latter, because the teachers' narratives seemed to foreground whether they felt the administrator was ignoring them or was concerned with showing teachers they were engaged, not the procedural requirements for classroom visits. The first author then replaced any time she used a procedural justice code in such instances in the wider sample to be coded as interpersonal justice instead.

This procedure is valuable to highlight any potential pitfalls where coders had difficulty categorizing text segments into code categories, or debated the units of analysis (e.g., they questioned the length of an excerpt from a transcript as covering more than the code to which it is assigned). This collaborative negotiation process in the "development stage" of coding (Campbell et al., 2013) revealed that we had high intercoder agreement (as measured using a simple proportional agreement method) and the coding scheme and data units were not a cause for discrepancies. This justified our decision to move on to the "deployment stage" of coding (Campbell et al., 2013), where it is typical for one coder (here, the first author) to recode the remainder of transcripts/field notes. This analytic approach ensures reliability, especially the reproducibility, of the study across coders.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

Once all data were coded in a spreadsheet, we studied similarities and patterns within principal/AP combinations (e.g., procedural justice with no gap; procedural justice high for principal and low for AP; or procedural justice low for principal and high for AP) by sorting the spreadsheet and contrasted these with data in other categories. In our results, we report frequencies of each combination to give readers a sense of how common they were in our sample, but we rely on teachers' own words to gain a better understanding of how perceived gaps in fairness between principals and APs emerge. From here, we used our coded data to develop a typology of different ways teachers perceived fairness from their administrators.

### **Qualitative Results**

We wanted to understand how potential perceptual gaps in fairness may look for teachers in their everyday interactions with their administrators. To answer research question one, we turn to the qualitative data, which offer glimpses into teachers' specific interactions with their administrators and how teachers narrated the unity or discrepancy in the fairness they perceived from their different administrators. We first present findings concerning procedural justice, then interpersonal justice.

### **The Importance of Procedurally Fair Assistant Principals**

Across the school sites, we found that teachers perceived their head principals and APs as having either parallel or divergent approaches in how they evaluated teachers' performance. Some teachers felt their principals and APs applied consistent standards to teachers when evaluating them, and were both good at giving feedback, making expectations clear, and gathering accurate information. In addition, "united" administrative teams (comprised of principals and APs) considered factors beyond teachers' control and allowed them to respond to their evaluations. This ideal scenario is reflected in the unshaded bottom right quadrant of the

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

typology of leader fairness in Figure 2, Panel A, labeled “High/High, no gap.” For example, Mr. Russell (pseudonym) describes having a principal and AP who both applied consistent standards when they evaluated his performance:

He’s [the principal is] fair, or they’re [the administrators are] fair, across the board. I don’t think, from what I can tell and observe, that they show favoritism. I can go to my principal any time I want to. As a matter of fact, this weekend, I called them when they were off duty. [He called back,] ‘Sorry I missed your call. What [do] you need?’ I feel that they are very approachable. They have an open-door policy.

Mr. Russell’s use of “they/them” when referring to the administrators in his school reflects his sense that he can go to any of them if he needs clarification, directions, or assistance. We found 17 other interviews like Mr. Russell’s in our sample, most from mid-career teachers (with 5-9 years of teaching experience), but also a few first-year and veteran teachers (with 10 or more years of experience), across all five schools in the sample.

**Figure 2.** Typology of Principal/Assistant Principal Fairness

### Panel A: Procedural Fairness

	<b>Head Principal</b>	
	Low procedural justice	High procedural justice
Low procedural justice	<i>Complete Underappreciation</i>  (Ms. Kline)	<i>Inconsistent standards</i>  (Ms. Elkins)
High procedural justice	<i>“Wouldn’t let me speak” vs. “feel free to communicate”</i>  (Mrs. Oxby)	<i>“They’re fair across the board”</i>  (Mr. Russell)

### Panel B: Interpersonal Fairness

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

### Head Principal

	Low interpersonal justice	High interpersonal justice
Low interpersonal justice	<i>Tag teaming misery</i>  (Mrs. Ingles)	<i>"Pretty fair" vs. "Picks and Chooses"</i>  (Ms. Valdosta)
High interpersonal justice	<i>The principal doesn't know my name</i>  (Mrs. Rockcliffe)	<i>"I can go to them" for the student or faculty end of things</i>  (Ms. Trunnell)

Note. Shaded boxes represent instances of a "justice gap;" unshaded, "no gap."

The other extreme case of no gap—whereby a head and AP are united, but in the opposite direction—appears in the unshaded top left quadrant of Figure 2, Panel A, where teachers experience “Low/Low” procedural justice from both administrators. Ms. Kline’s case illustrates this situation, where neither the head nor APs take into account factors beyond her control in their evaluation of her performance.

I don't like how they [administrators] make us compete against each other. At the end of the data meeting yesterday, [the head principal] was basically like, 'I need a lot better from you guys.' I'm the only first-year teacher in the group. And I don't feel that the assistant principals notice my hard work.

For Ms. Kline, absent from the administrative team was a recognition of her hard work and consideration of the demands she faced in her work. We found 21 other such examples of Low/Low procedural justice in our sample, across all five schools and experience levels of teachers.

Finally, instances of gaps between head and AP procedural justice are reflected in the two shaded quadrants of Figure 2, Panel A. There were few cases of teachers perceiving their principal as more procedurally just than their AP (n=7 of 98). One of these cases was Ms. Elkins,

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

a first-year teacher who felt singled out and harshly evaluated by her AP. She did not have these kinds of experiences with her head principal. She recalls a time when she was berated by the AP in front of her colleagues, and the standards she was judged by were both different from what she thought the expectations were and were not consistently applied to other teachers.

One day [at a data meeting], I got destroyed, just really reamed out. It wasn't [the head principal] that had done it. It was [one of the assistant principals]. It was terrible. I ended up in tears and the other teachers didn't know what to say. A few jaws were hanging open I think. I was being yelled at. I put in my data before I came to the meeting, but it wasn't included in the groups' packets because I hadn't finished it in time. And [the AP] was like, 'Well, didn't your department ask for this earlier?' And I was like, 'Yeah, but I was a little late.' In the email, it said it was due at the meeting, and it was there at the meeting. And she was just like, 'Why is your data always late?' She just ripped into me. It felt like a line was crossed. It was uncalled for in my opinion. Especially because it came out of nowhere. It was really, no lead up, nothing. And it was in front of everybody. And then Ms. Kline had actually completed less of her packet than I had, but nothing was said to her. Just 'good job.'

This instance of informal evaluation shows the application of harsher standards to Ms. Elkins than her colleagues. Moreover, the AP did not allow Ms. Elkins an opportunity to respond to the negative assessment she was making of Ms. Elkins, as it "came out of nowhere" and involved no consideration of factors that affected Ms. Elkins' performance (i.e., that her department printed their packets before her data were submitted). Most of the other cases in this quadrant were novice teachers—though some had more teaching experience—and came from all schools except one of the suburban schools.

In comparison, the other "gap" instances of procedural justice in the sample were more numerous (n=12) and involved APs being fairer with teachers in the evaluations than were head principals. Mrs. Oxby's experience vividly exemplifies an AP allowing her to respond to her informal evaluation, while the head principal did not:

After [the head principal] saw me showing a movie in my class one day, he made me feel like a total piece of shit. [So after this happened, I go into his office to explain.] I was



## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

calm and I had my stuff written out, and he didn't let me speak. He just did a face and he said 'this meeting's over.' And stood up. I ended up emailing Dr. Cellini [an assistant principal]. And she came and talked through the whole thing and was great. She was like 'You know he knows you're a good teacher. If you wanna come to me and communicate about stuff, feel free to because you're not the only teacher that has had an issue.'

Mrs. Oxby, who rarely showed clips of movies during class, expressed stress and dismay by the procedural injustice shown when her principal "wouldn't let [her] speak," whereas her AP listened to Oxby's views. Other cases in this quadrant came from across experience levels and from all schools except one of the suburban schools.

### **The Importance of Interpersonally Fair Head Principals**

Interestingly, in our sample, the "no gap" scenario in interpersonal justice between head and APs was far more common than the "gap" scenario. Administrative teams worked in concert in the extent of kindness, consideration, concern for workers' rights, impartiality, truthfulness, and timeliness they showed in their interactions with teachers. They either made teachers feel like "I can go to them [for anything I need]" (in the case of Ms. Trunnell), or like they had no one to turn to that they could trust. In the latter case, the case of Mrs. Ingles is illustrative. She described how her AP was not kind or considerate towards her, and her head principal followed suit.

I think [my assistant principal] hates me. And I'm not the only teacher that feels that. I think there's several that, if you're not a man and you're not one of those people in the clique, then she has nothing for you. And it's scary, because Mr. Eubanks [the head principal] seems to do what she [the AP] wants. Because if she doesn't like you, is she going to destroy his image of you? And there's nothing you can do about it.

In all, our data highlighted 64 cases where teachers perceived that their administrators shared a positive (n=29) or negative (n=35) tone in their interpersonal relations with teachers, suggesting that head and APs often set the tone for manager-employee social interactions in a consistent way, even opening the possibility that, as Mrs. Ingles worries about, they may influence one

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

another. The interpersonal justice typology in Figure 2, Panel B reflects these “no gap” scenarios in the unshaded quadrants.

Of particular interest from our qualitative findings is the “gap” scenario when head principals excel in showing kindness, consideration, and the like to their teachers, in contrast to a lack of these demonstrations from their APs. We found 11 such cases in our data, which pertained to all experience levels of teachers across the five schools. For example, a department chair, Ms. Valdosta, describes how she could count on her head principal to show little or no bias in her interactions with teachers, maintaining friendliness alongside fairness, while APs would say negative things to teachers that Ms. Valdosta found damaging to her teacher colleagues.

[The head principal] is pretty fair about how she treats someone. She will get all up in your grill regardless of who you are. She's written me a nice little 'hey.' ... But sometimes when she's had enough of you being stupid, she going to take it a little further, you know, she's going to stay on you. But that's only, I, I, I, I don't feel like that's necessarily picking [on someone], I feel like that's probably only right. ... Now there's a couple of APs—I won't say who they are—but they definitely have picks and chooses. One of them, I think their life mission is just to feel important. You have nothing better to do but feel important by saying things to people. I wish you would take your tail on somewhere else and stop talking to my teachers.

Cases of greater interpersonal justice from the head principal appeared most often for mid-career and veteran teachers in two of the schools in our sample (one urban, one suburban).

In contrast, we found nine cases where APs outperformed head principals in interpersonal justice—across all schools, but especially prevalent for mid-career teachers in one suburban school with a head principal brand-new to the school (but who had previous experience as a principal at an elementary school). One example involved a principal not knowing his teachers' names and avoiding coming to their classrooms when they needed help, compared to APs who knew teachers' names and would come when called. For instance, Mrs. Rockcliffe reflected that

The only time [my head principal] talks to me is if he passes me in the hallway...that's it. But he's never been in my classroom. [An assistant principal] is assigned to the SPED

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

department, so anything I've ever emailed him, he'll copy her and say let me talk to Mrs. Waldorf. [When] we have to call for principal help, when he first started he would come. Like, if we 911'ed, he would come, and that didn't last very long. Now it's always [an assistant principal].

This example shows how a principal's delegation to APs can come across to teachers as an overly impersonal, distant approach to school leadership—belying an interpersonally just approach to relating to teachers.

Next, we turn to our quantitative data to provide further insight into how gaps in fairness appear in teachers' survey responses. The quantitative results also extend our study by describing the importance of fairness perceptions of both principals and APs as they relate to the outcome of teacher organizational commitment.

### **Quantitative Methods**

#### **Data**

We use original survey data collected by the first author from the same five high schools in which interviews took place. The first author administered these surveys concurrently with or after collecting interview data, representing a non-sequential, nested data collection design. Our survey dataset consists of 354 teachers (N=312 in the fall, N=327 in the spring, some responding at one time only) of 392 total teachers across all sites, representing an overall response rate of about 90%. Teachers were recruited to participate in the survey on a voluntary basis following an announcement at faculty meetings and email invitations to participate. A \$10 incentive was offered to those who completed the survey. The schools surveyed were in two districts, one urban and one suburban (see Tables 1 and 2 for demographic information). In a pre-test of the survey piloted with a few former teachers in the settings prior to the year of study, teachers urged the inclusion of separate survey questions for the AP to whom they reported because they said they had different perceptions of APs versus head principals. This was an early clue that studying

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

APs in the context of the larger study deserved closer attention. In turn, the official survey asked teachers to provide their perceptions of fairness in how their head versus APs treated them, as well as other assessments of their working conditions and work attitudes (among them, commitment) and their demographic backgrounds.

**Table 2.** Survey Sample Descriptives

Variable	N	Mean / %	N, Full population of 5 schools	Mean / %, Full population of 5 schools
Gender	354		384	
Man		37.96%		38.54%
Woman		62.04%		61.46%
Race	354		385	
White		60.17%		60.78%
Non-white		39.83%		39.22%
Locale	354		388	
Urban		47.74%		47.42%
Suburban		52.26%		52.58%

### Measures and Analysis

We employed SEM as our analytic framework (Kline, 2016). SEM simultaneously accounts for latent construct measurement errors and tests structural relationships among latent and observed variables by integrating measurement theory, factor analysis, and path analysis (Hoyle, 2012). An SEM framework fits our research purpose as we aimed first to establish measures of the constructs pertinent to our study—organizational justice and commitment—and then test the structural relationships among them. We used the *Mplus* 8.5 software package. In what follows, we describe elements of our measurement model and the structural model.

#### *Measurement Model*

We measured elements of organizational justice and organizational commitment with multiple survey items (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics). For each concept, we computed

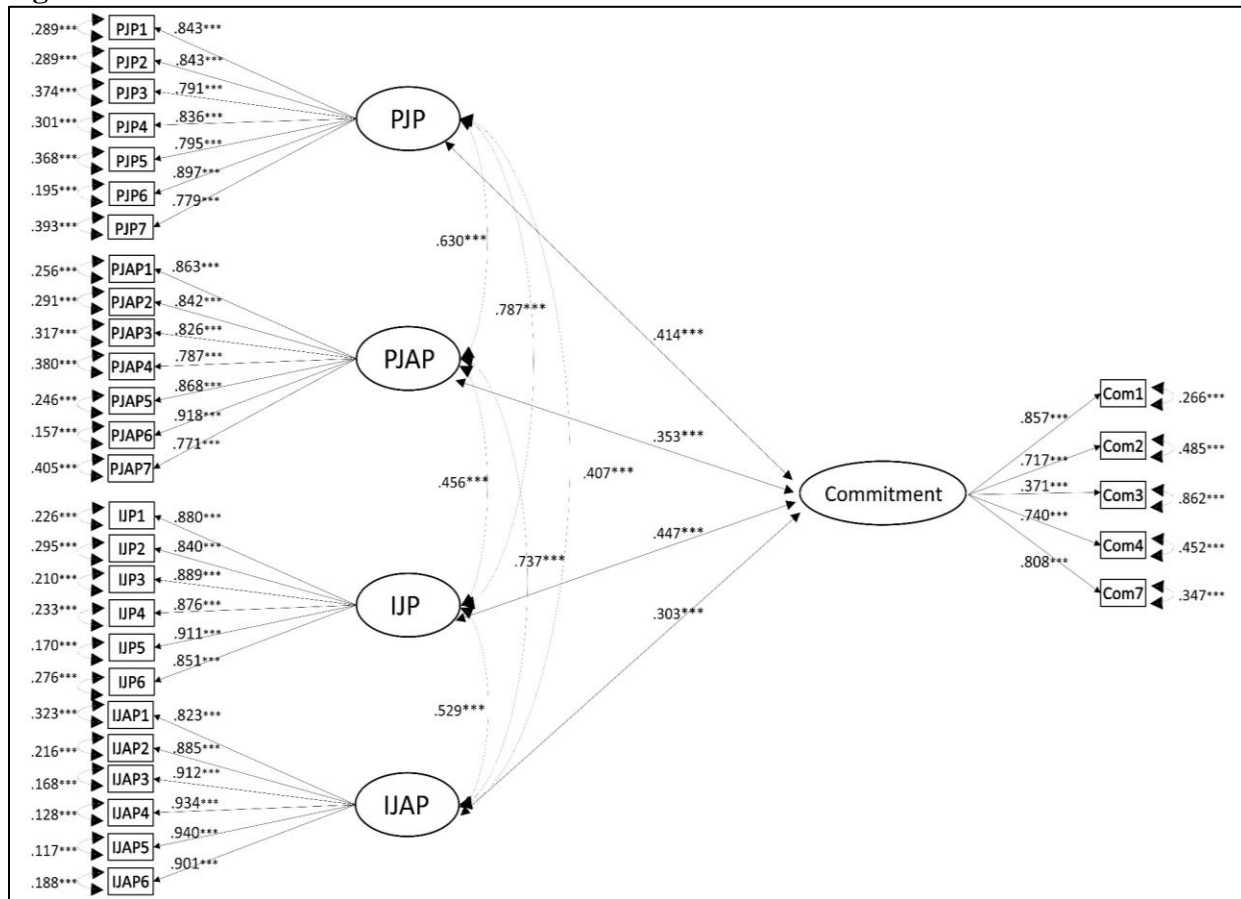
TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

latent variables through confirmatory factor analysis, a standard approach to establishing a measurement model (see Figure 3 for factor loadings).

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics of Latent Variables

Variable	N	M	SD	Min	Max
<b>PJP (Procedural Justice-Principal)</b>	308	3.781	1.02	1	5
The following section concerns your head principal. With regard to your PERFORMANCE, to what extent has your principal done each of the following? (1= Not at all, 5 = Very much)					
PJP1 used consistent standards in evaluating your performance.					
PJP2 gave you feedback that helped you learn how well you were doing.					
PJP3 took into account factors beyond your control.					
PJP4 allowed you to respond before an evaluation was made.					
PJP5 made clear what was expected of you.					
PJP6 obtained accurate information about your performance.					
PJP7 observed your performance frequently.					
<b>IJP (Interpersonal Justice-Principal)</b>	310	4.154	0.89	1	5
The following items refer to the head principal. Your principal... (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)					
IJP1 considers your viewpoint.					
IJP2 treats you without bias.					
IJP3 treats you with kindness and consideration.					
IJP4 shows concern for your rights as an employee.					
IJP5 takes steps to deal with you in a truthful manner.					
IJP6 provides you with timely feedback about decisions and implications.					
<b>PJAP (Procedural Justice-Assistant Principal)</b>	308	3.779	1.02	1	5
The following section concerns the Assistant Principal (AP) who you report to. With regard to your PERFORMANCE, to what extent has your AP done each of the following? (1= Not at all, 5 = Very much)					
PJAP1 used consistent standards in evaluating your performance.					
PJAP2 gave you feedback that helped you learn how well you were doing.					
PJAP3 took into account factors beyond your control.					
PJAP4 allowed you to respond before an evaluation was made.					
PJAP5 made clear what was expected of you.					
PJAP6 obtained accurate information about your performance.					
PJAP7 observed your performance frequently.					
<b>IJAP (Interpersonal Justice-Assistant Principal)</b>	305	4.160	0.86	1	5
The following items refer to the Assistant Principal (AP) who you report to. Your AP... (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)					
IJAP1 considers your viewpoint.					
IJAP2 treats you without bias.					
IJAP3 treats you with kindness and consideration.					
IJAP4 shows concern for your rights as an employee.					
IJAP5 takes steps to deal with you in a truthful manner.					
IJAP6 provides you with timely feedback about decisions and implications.					
<b>Commitment</b>	326	3.897	0.83	1.2	5
Com1 I am proud to be able to tell people who I work for (1= Strongly disagree, 5= Strongly agree).					
Com2 I feel that I am part of the school.					
Com3 I would not recommend a close friend to join our staff (Reverse coded).					
Com4 I wouldn't want to work in any other school.					
Com7 I would recommend this school to parents seeking a place for their child.					

**Figure 3.** Measurement Model



Note. PJP = Procedural Justice of Principal, PJAP = Procedural Justice of Assistant Principal, IJP = Interpersonal Justice of Principal, IJAP = Interpersonal Justice of Assistant Principal. Double-headed arrows attached to rectangles indicate the residual variance, which denotes the amount of variances not explained by the associated latent factors. Double-headed arrows between two ellipses present inter-factor correlations.  $N = 354$ .  $\chi^2 = 1045.191$  ( $p = 0.00$ ), RMSEA = 0.065, CFI = 0.935, TLI = 0.927, SRMR = 0.043. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Organizational justice.* We measured teachers' perceptions of organizational justice in their workplace using survey items developed by Folger and Konovsky (1989) on procedural justice and by Moorman (1991) on interpersonal justice. To capture procedural justice, seven items assessed the extent to which teachers felt that the head principal, during performance evaluations, used consistent standards; gave them helpful feedback; took into account factors beyond the teachers' control; allowed the teachers to respond before an evaluation was made; made expectations clear; obtained accurate information; and observed them frequently.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

Measurement of interpersonal justice of the principal focused on six items, evaluating the extent to which teachers perceived the administrator considered their viewpoint; treated them without bias; treated them with kindness and consideration; showed concerns for their employee rights; dealt in a truthful manner; and provided timely feedback about decisions. We asked the same sets of items for procedural and interpersonal justice regarding “the assistant principal you report to” (see Table 3 for item format).<sup>6</sup> We computed each respondent’s mean score of each type of justice, using raw scores. For example, in terms of the computation of principal PJ, we used seven items, and computed each participant’s mean score. After that, we computed the mean score of all participants, which was 3.78 (see Table 3). With the goal of taking the head principal as the reference and seeing how APs performed in comparison, we computed the gaps in teacher perception of the head and APs in procedural justice and interpersonal justice by subtracting AP scores from those of principals. We used the fall data for our justice variables since they are the antecedent to the outcome, organizational commitment, and since utilizing two separate time points helps reduce common methods bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

*Organizational commitment.* We employed organizational commitment as the outcome variable of the study, using the spring survey data. We measured this latent construct concerning teachers’ organizational commitment via five observed items, three from Stride and colleagues’ (2008) concept of organizational identification, and two from Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) concept of teacher commitment to the school community. While identification and commitment are distinct concepts, like Stride et al. (2008), we conceptualized organizational identification as one component of overall organizational commitment, and Bryk and Schneider’s items further

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<sup>6</sup> Our experience piloting the survey and interviewing teachers provided us assurances that “reporting to” an AP and being assigned to them for evaluation was synonymous. In addition, the fieldwork and pilot survey confirmed that all teachers had a main AP they reported to.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

emphasized commitment to a particular school. The five items measured the extent to which individual teachers feel proud of their school; feel they are part of the school; would not recommend their friend to join the staff (reverse coded); would not work for any other school; and would recommend their school to parents.

For building this measurement model, we employed confirmatory factor analysis, simultaneously including our outcome (commitment) and predictors (procedural justice and interpersonal justice of head and APs). Confirmatory factor analysis was appropriate as our purpose was to confirm the adequacy of the hypothesized model (e.g., procedural justice items validated by Folger and Konovsky, 1989) to our data. Following Hu and Bentler (1999), we adopted a two-index presentation strategy, which pairs any two model fit indices to make an informed decision making about model fit adequacy, from among the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). We report all model fits indices, while choosing cutoff values close to  $RMSEA < .06$  and cutoff values close to  $SRMR < .08$  as an indication of an acceptable fit.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Structural Model***

In the subsequent structural models, we implemented two separate SEM models. Model 1 tested the extent to which main effects explained the variance in teachers' organizational commitment, controlling for covariates. We define main effects as teachers' perceptions of the principal's procedural and interpersonal justice and those of AP's procedural and interpersonal justice. In Model 2, we then regressed teachers' organizational commitment (outcome) on the

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<sup>7</sup> Note, the chi-square goodness-of-fit statistic often rejects models with adequate fit even though the proposed model fits the data well (Hox, 2010). Significant chi-square statistics are common in sample sizes greater than  $N=200$  (Kline, 2016).



two perception gap variables as predictors, while also considering covariates. We included additional observed variables as covariates, following research evidence on their significant associations with organizational commitment (Karim, 2010). The observed covariates include school (as a fixed effect), teacher is female, and teacher is white. We included a set of dummy variables as a fixed effect, identifying the schools to encapsulate the locale effect and the unexplained error at the school level. In both measurement and structural models, we handled missing data using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) (Graham, 2003). FIML uses all available information from each observation and case-wise log-likelihood to include incomplete observations, refining parameter estimates.

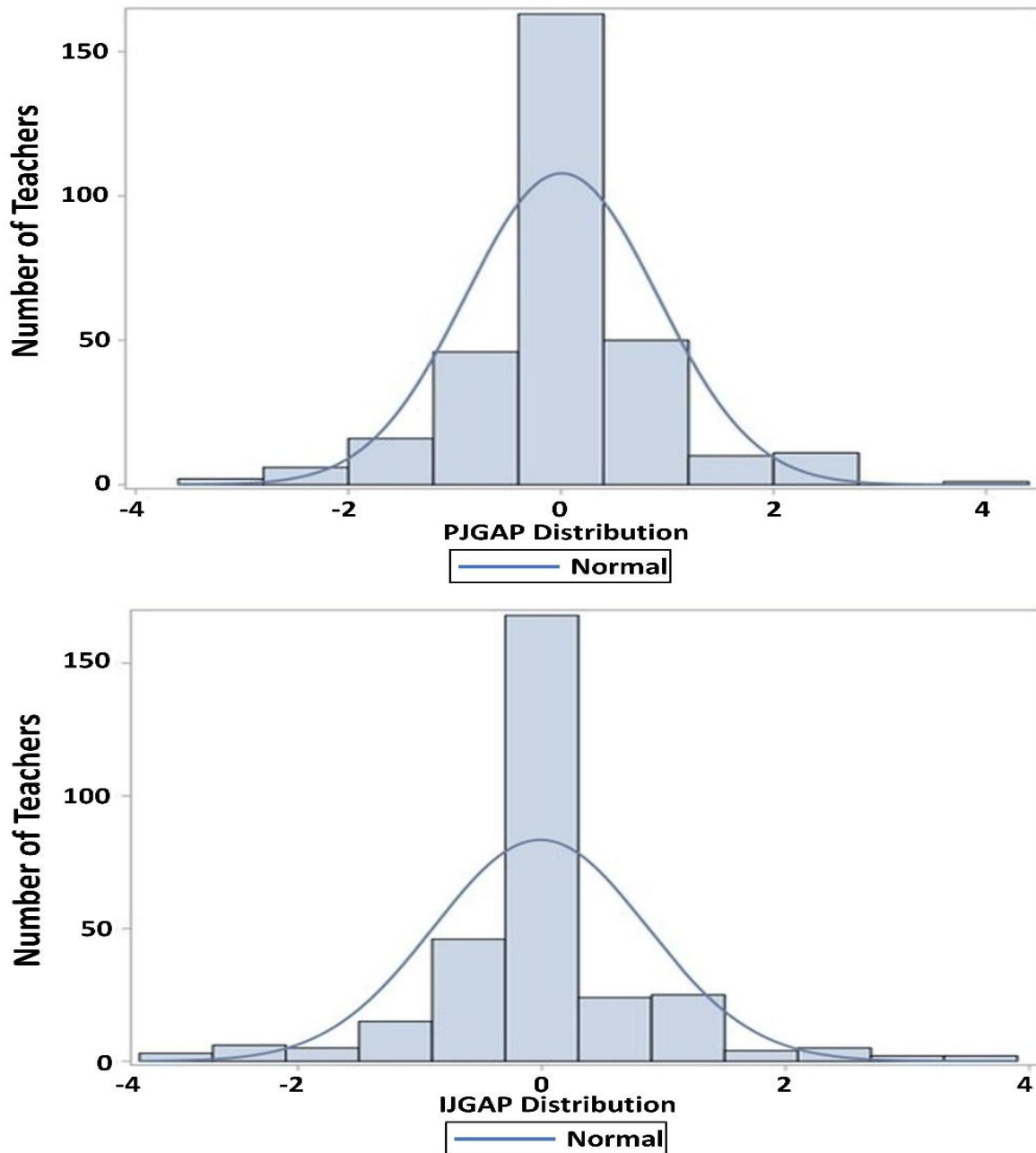
### **Quantitative Results**

Concerning research question 1, whether teachers perceive differences in the fairness with which their principal versus AP treats them, descriptive statistics of the two types of justice variables for the head and APs show that the means are equal or near-equal (Table 3). Such aggregate measures, however, overlook the distribution of differences that individuals offered in their assessments of the fairness of each type of principal, which histograms in Figure 4 visualize. Recall that we calculated the gap by subtracting a respondent's perceived fairness of the AP from his/her perceived fairness of the head principal. Figure 4 shows that both justice variable gap scores (procedural and interpersonal) indicate a near-normal distribution. This distribution speaks to the fact that individual teachers' perception gaps of justice are distributed around the means, and it provides a rationale for further examination of whether these gaps are associated with teacher outcomes, namely their commitment. A supplemental frequency analysis (not shown) shows 43% of respondents indicated no gap in procedural justice between head and APs, and 26% percent said likewise for interpersonal justice—representing the center of the

# TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

distribution curves. Nevertheless, these distributions still highlight that more than half to three-quarters of teachers perceived the gaps. That is, they perceived a difference between how their head and APs treated them—a situation consistent with the views of many teachers in our qualitative results.

**Figure 4.** Distribution of Procedural & Interpersonal Justice Gap Scores



## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

In terms of research question two, with the survey data, we first established a measurement model (Figure 3) that simultaneously tested all latent constructs, including the main effects (principal's procedural and interpersonal justice, AP's procedural and interpersonal justice) and our outcome measure (teacher organizational commitment). Our measurement model successfully converged with adequate model fit, following a two-index strategy (RMSEA = 0.065, CFI = 0.935, TLI = 0.927, SRMR = 0.043), with all items indicating strong (greater than 0.70) standardized factor loadings and significant at  $p < 0.001$  level.

We then tested two separate SEM solutions to respond to the second research question (SEM Models 1 and 2 in Table 4). SEM Model 1 converged with adequate model fit (RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.916, TLI = 0.909, SRMR = 0.075), with RMSEA indicating slightly higher values than the desired cutoff of 0.06. Table 4 presents the results of SEM Model 1. None of the main effects, except the principal's interpersonal justice, predicted the variation in teachers' organizational commitment. Specifically, we did not find strong evidence that teacher perceptions of their principal's procedural justice and their AP's procedural and interpersonal justice explain the extent to which teachers report commitment to their current organization, while controlling for the school's locale and teacher gender and race. Only one main effect—interpersonal justice of the principal—indicated a significant, positive association with teacher organizational commitment (standardized parameter estimate = 0.258,  $p < 0.05$ ). This finding

**Table 4.** Results from Structural Equation Models

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Estimate (SE)</b>	<b>Estimate (SE)</b>
Teacher perceptions of procedural justice of principal	0.014 (0.136)	—
Teacher perceptions of interpersonal justice of principal	0.258* (0.125)	—
Teacher perceptions of procedural justice of assistant principal	0.153 (0.123)	—
Teacher perceptions of interpersonal justice of assistant principal	-0.049 (0.109)	—
Procedural justice gap score	—	-0.243* (0.103)

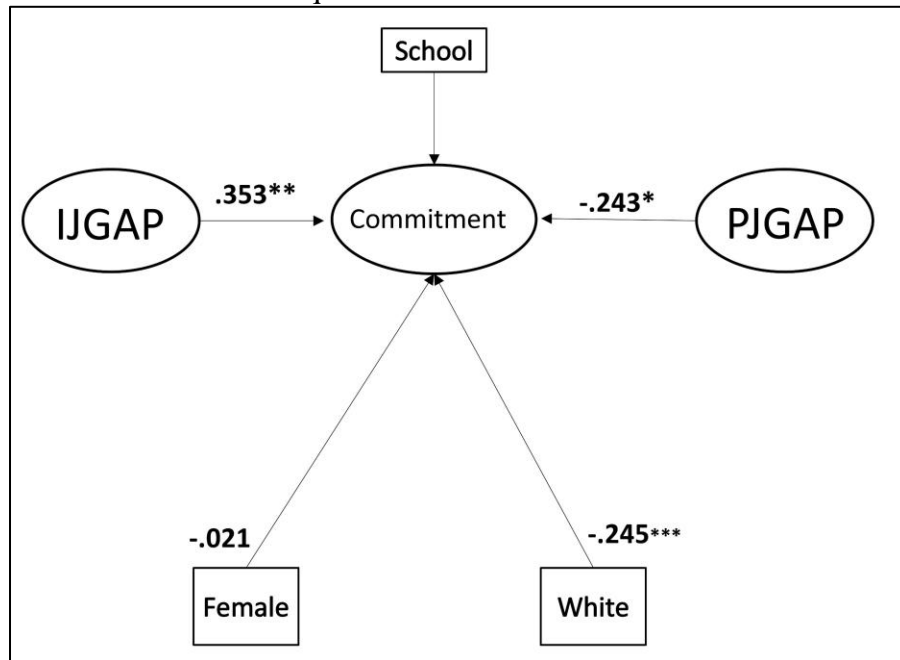
## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

Interpersonal justice gap score	—	0.353** (0.104)
Female	-0.025 (0.047)	-0.021 (0.047)
White	-0.209** (0.056)	-0.245** (0.056)

*Note.* Parameter estimates are all standardized. Both models contain a set of school dummy variables as controls. Gap scores are computed at the individual teacher level using their principal perception value minus their assistant principal perception value (P – AP). N = 352. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Model 1 fit: RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.916, TLI = 0.909, SRMR = 0.075. Model 2 fit: RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.915, TLI = 0.907, SRMR = 0.103

means that a one standard deviation increase in interpersonal justice of the principal is associated with a 0.258 standard deviation increase in teacher organizational commitment. In other words, teachers in the sample who believed that their principals were interpersonally fair were also more committed to their school organization.

Having learned that most main effects were not associated with teachers' organizational commitment, we proceeded to answer our third research question regarding whether the *gaps* in teacher perceptions between head and APs, in both procedural and interpersonal justice, explained the variation in teacher organizational commitment. SEM Model 2 successfully converged, indicating adequate model fit (RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.915, TLI = 0.907, SRMR = 0.103) with RMSEA and SRMR indicating slightly higher fit values than the desired 0.06 and 0.08, respectively. As depicted in Table 4 and Figure 5, Model 2 shows that the gap between assessments of the procedural justice of the head and AP was significantly and negatively associated with teachers' organizational commitment (standardized parameter estimate = -0.243,  $p < 0.05$ ). This finding suggests that when teachers feel their AP is fair in how they evaluate teacher performance, this is more strongly related to their own commitment to the school than are fair evaluations from their principal.

**Figure 5.** Results of the Structural Equation Model 2

*Note.* PJGAP = PJP – IJP, IJGAP = IJP – IJAP. Rectangles (e.g., PJP1) denote observed variables. Ovals denote latent factors. Single-headed arrows from PJGAP, IJGAP, Urban, Female, and White denote regression coefficients, indicating the associations between the predictors (i.e., PJGAP, IJGAP, Urban, Female, White) and the outcome (Commitment) variable. SEM regression parameter estimates are all standardized. A set of school dummy variables were used as a fixed effect to encapsulate the locale effect plus the unexplained error at the school-level.  $N = 352$ .  $\chi^2 = 1448.264$  ( $p = 0.00$ ), RMSEA = 0.063, CFI = 0.915, TLI = 0.907, SRMR = 0.103. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .00$

At the same time, the gap in interpersonal justice teachers perceived of their head versus APs was significantly and positively associated with teachers' organizational commitment (standardized parameter estimate = 0.353,  $p < 0.01$ ), whose effect size is larger than the main effect of the head principal interpersonal justice (0.258,  $p < 0.05$ ). That is, the extent to which individual teachers felt their head principals treated them with a higher level of interpersonal justice than their AP significantly and positively predicted teachers' commitment to the school organization. This finding extends our insight from research question 2, in that it appears that some kindness and consideration from the principal – even if not a high value – can compensate when AP kindness and consideration is low.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

In terms of covariate parameters, teachers of color were more highly committed to their schools than their White colleagues (standardized parameter estimate =  $-0.245$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Teacher gender did not have a significant association with commitment.

Although informative of the association between teacher perception gaps between the head and AP and the teacher's level of commitment, SEM analysis does not provide as clear of a picture of the four quadrants illustrated in Figure 2 of the qualitative results. We wanted to understand the relationship between the quadrants to commitment outcomes in our quantitative data. Therefore, we conducted a supplemental quantitative analysis where we divided survey participants into the High/High, High/Low, Low/High, or Low/Low quadrants as in Figure 2, and examined the average commitment factor scores under each of those conditions.

Unsurprisingly, we found that High/High perceptions of fairness were associated with the highest teacher organizational commitment levels, and Low/Low with the lowest. In terms of the “off-diagonals,” average commitment factor scores of teachers in the High principal/Low AP quadrant were higher than those in the Low principal/High AP quadrant. These same patterns held across procedural and interpersonal justice. Full results of this supplemental analysis appear in Figure A1 in the Appendix. While mostly consistent with the SEM results, our supplemental analysis: (1) uniquely demonstrates that Low/Low leader combinations may have no gap but are damaging the commitment of the teachers, whereas High/High leaders would also have no gap but bolster commitment; and (2) suggests, in contrast to the SEM pattern of findings, that teacher organizational commitment is higher when principals are perceived fairer than APs in both procedural and interpersonal justice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> We believe that this second supplemental finding should be interpreted with caution, as the numbers of teachers in these off-diagonal quadrants are relatively low compared to the other quadrants.

## Discussion

In this study, we use multiple data sources and mixed methods to assess whether teachers perceive differences in the fairness with which their principal versus AP treats them concerning teacher evaluation processes and daily workplace social interactions. We further investigate how such differences may relate to teachers' commitment to their schools. Our qualitative findings show that teachers often perceive the fairness of their principals and APs—both in terms of how consistently they applied procedures across teachers and how fairly they treated teachers—in disparate ways. Our SEM results suggest that teachers' perceptions of helpful, unbiased, clear, and frequent feedback on their performance from their AP—that is, procedural justice—are associated with higher levels of teacher organizational commitment (Table 4, Model 2). We also have evidence that teachers' commitment to the organization is shaped by their belief that the principal enacts kind, considerate interpersonal treatment—that is, interpersonal justice—more so than their APs. Our supplemental analysis clarifies that justice gaps are not good for teacher organizational commitment, *per se*. We advance two major observations based on this mixed-methods analysis.

First, the interview data conveyed that both leaders were engaged in the “poetry and plumbing” of leadership (March & Weil, 2005), upholding Selznick's (1957) view that task type should not be partitioned across leadership roles. In our sample, there appear to be overlapping tasks between the principal and AP, and there is less division of labor and tasks than might be presumed. Extant literature on principals (e.g., Lortie, 2009) and APs (e.g., Moyer & Goldring, 2022) suggests that principals are preoccupied with tasks associated with a cultural/institutional leadership role—such as creating meaning, establishing a mission, and motivating teachers to set and reach goals—while APs are more dedicated to tasks associated with an operational/technical

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

leadership role—such as taking attendance and managing student discipline. However, our qualitative data suggest that it was not simply a division of leadership roles driving the distinct expectations teachers had for types of fairness from their different administrators. For instance, Mrs. Oxby's head and APs were both engaged in the technical (perhaps “plumbing”) work of teacher evaluation that involved debriefing between the teacher and administrator after a poor evaluation had been made, and Ms. Valdosta's account of her head principal's more considerate treatment of her colleagues than the AP shows how both head and APs left an impression in terms of the interpersonal, culture-making (perhaps “poetry”) aspects of their jobs.

One way in which this blurring of roles was apparent was in instances in the qualitative data where APs provided important compensatory procedural justice when the head principal failed to be consistent or allow for correctability from teachers following the observation (an instance of “plumbing”), and principals provided compensatory interpersonal justice when one of their APs came across as inconsiderate to the teacher (an instance of “poetry”). Such examples in our data go beyond the current emphasis in studies of APs that focus on their practices or their time spent on different leadership tasks (e.g., Moyer & Goldring, 2022; Woo, 2020) to highlight how principals and APs do overlapping tasks within a system of shared subordinates—with inter-related consequences on teachers. Based on how teachers narrated these scenarios, these positive leadership practices worked not simply to close the gap from another unjust teacher-administrator encounter, but rather to let the teacher know that an administrator was there for them who would defend their fair evaluation or treatment.

Second, we reveal the importance of the gaps in teachers' perceptions of justice from principals and APs, which may have downstream consequences for teacher organizational commitment. Our quantitative findings expand our understanding of how these justice gaps



## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

matter for teacher outcomes, with a focus on teacher's commitment to their school. The finding in our SEM analysis that the direction of the procedural justice gap was opposite that of the interpersonal justice gap suggests that teachers distinguish the types of fairness from their principals as well as from their APs. The finding that teachers' commitment to their schools appears more sensitive to APs' fair evaluation practices than to principals' suggests that APs are engaged in a consequential amount of direct instructional leadership tasks, consistent with our qualitative observations in our settings, as well as Sun's (2018) findings. In addition, the finding that teachers placed such a high premium on their head principals being interpersonally adept and fair is in line with our qualitative findings of the same, as well as with prior theorizing on the principal's role that elevates them as a culture-builder and a "politician" (Matthews & Crow, 2003). As Matthews and Crow (2003) explain, effective principals can facilitate understanding across groups and model democracy in the way they allow others to voice their views. These are political tasks because they help leaders build consensus, but they also align with the concept of interpersonal justice, as they show consideration and concern for subordinates. In turn, the patterns in our quantitative findings suggest something important for understanding teacher organizational commitment: both head and APs are perceived to play significant—but somewhat distinct—roles to prevent potential withdrawal or turnover from the school. Taken together, these findings add to the understanding of complex dynamics in leadership among school administrators, with a particular focus on APs absent in prior literature.

### **Study Limitations**

Although the patterns of our quantitative and qualitative findings suggest complexities requiring further research, we recognize that our sample is limited in its generalizability and breadth. It is certainly possible that the five principals of the high schools in this study assigned

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

varying duties (i.e., charges to perform specific tasks) to their APs, and even those roles could be in flux throughout the school year (see Table 1 for a list of AP roles). There is also the limitation that APs may do teaching evaluations to a different extent within schools and comparing across schools, making teachers' ratings of AP procedural justice more difficult to interpret. This fluidity of APs' roles could affect the pattern of findings about how teachers perceive those APs.

Additionally, our quantitative analysis may have omitted unobserved variables that could affect the commitment outcomes investigated in our research questions. It is possible that teachers who are generally satisfied with their current job responded positively to questions about justice and commitment. The high response rate in our study does protect against this possibility somewhat, as we are likely to have captured a range of general orientations towards one's job in our sample. Future research could gather more information on how AP roles vary over a larger sample of schools, including elementary and middle schools, and how those roles fluctuate over time. Such a study could adopt a multilevel, longitudinal analytic approach to make greater claims of validity and generalizability.

We further noticed in our qualitative data that about a third of the cases of procedural justice and about a quarter of the interpersonal justice showed evidence of a "justice gap." That is, the bulk of qualitative data segments implied consistency of fairness ratings between the head and AP—for better or for worse—in terms of their fairness. Such consistency is unsurprising, presuming that leader behaviors set a school culture within which other organizational members act accordingly (Grissom et al., 2021; Mayer & Kuenzi, 2010). However, we also note that qualitative data may not reflect existing gaps as well as the quantitative data might, because respondents were not explicitly asked about the 13 different conceptual dimensions represented

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

in the survey items. In comparison, our quantitative data showed participants' justice gaps in 57% cases of procedural justice and 74% of interpersonal justice.

### **Future Research**

Our investigation begins to address the larger question of whether it matters that teachers differentially assess leaders within a school based on the leader's position. Our approach and findings inform research in educational leadership, first by addressing the omission of APs in extant research on the consequences of leadership practices for teacher turnover, and second, by showing the extent to which principals and APs are coordinated in their leadership roles and tasks. We add to a growing number of studies that emphasize similarities or distinctions between principals and APs (e.g., Bartanen et al. 2021; Woo, 2020) by highlighting how teachers experience their interactions with these school administrators. Along these lines, our findings provide a caution for studies on the relationship between school administrators' practices and teachers' outcomes, implying that information about school administrators should be measured with more nuance and precision by including data about principals and similar data on APs. Future research could also look at what goes awry in schools with fairness gaps present among principals and APs, and whether and how these gaps may threaten the retention of teachers and, thereby, the stability of the school. And in terms of coordination between principal and AP, our findings suggest ways this could be improved. For instance, principals exhibiting procedurally just practices in their schools could be effective mentors for APs to grow their competency in this area, providing more structure to APs' on-the-job training experience (Goldring et al., 2021).

We also make a broader theoretical contribution to the organizational justice literature, which seldom presumes that employees report to multiple leaders. We highlight how procedural and interpersonal justice are relational and contextual constructs that may vary depending on

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

school-specific considerations of the number of leaders to whom subordinates report and the distinctive responsibilities of each leader. We show how evaluations of fairness may be adjusted when there are multiple leaders and the lower authority's perceived fairness is considered. Future research should additionally consider whether employees' frequency of contact with leaders of different ranks helps explain any observed differences across leaders and justice types. Finally, future work could examine the potential transferability of our findings to other work contexts, such as school district central offices and industries beyond education. In workplace contexts where subordinates report to two supervisors—such as in matrix organizations, cross-departmental project work, and entrepreneurial ventures with fuzzy roles between manager and project leads—similar patterns of gaps in perceptions of fairness might emerge.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy and Conclusions**

The patterns of results from our study have implications for practicing educational leaders, leadership preparation programs, policymakers, and in-service professional development (PD) providers, as well as for organizational theory and organizational leadership broadly.

### **Implications for Practicing Educational Leaders and Preparation Programs**

Our findings suggest that gaps between teachers' perceptions of head versus APs regarding procedural and interpersonal matters may be detrimental to teachers' organizational commitment—in some cases, even regardless of whether head principals or APs are fairer than the other. The gaps we find may be indicative of divergent approaches to supervision, strained communication, and even ethical qualms between principal and AP. Such dilemmas in principal-AP relationships appeared in our study, such as when one leader offered compensatory justice to pick up the slack from the other leader. Presented also as common problems of leadership practice in case studies, disagreements between principal and AP can emerge over matters such

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

as frequency of teacher evaluation, providing directive versus reflective feedback to teachers, and the responsibilities the principal delegates to the AP (Baker et al., 2018; Gonzales, 2019). Unresolved, these disagreements can result in not only poor coordination between occupants of leadership roles and inconsistency in their demonstrations of organizational justice, but also teachers' decreased commitment.

In relation to our findings, poor coordination and relationship dilemmas between principals and APs could be addressed by implementing work processes that assist in creating fluidity in roles so that principals and APs know each other's approach to shared leadership tasks, seek mediation when conflicts emerge, and help balance the tensions each party experiences in their assigned duties. If principals and APs know one another's approaches to tasks and goals, they may be able to consistently uphold organizational justice in the school. For example, principals and APs could coordinate in terms of procedural justice by conducting follow-up evaluation conferences with teachers together and communicating to teachers that they calibrated their ratings with each other. Regarding mediation, research in negotiations suggests that peer intervention is seen as fairer than supervisor intervention (Karambayya et al., 1992). Applied to our context, third parties who are not supervisors to the principal or AP – perhaps a principal and AP in another school in the district who are known and trusted by the principal and AP experiencing a strained relationship – could work as “conciliatory brokers” (Halevy et al., 2020). These mediators could incentivize cooperation between principals and their APs whose approaches to interpersonal and/or procedural justice are misaligned.

In terms of balancing tensions across roles, our data suggest that teachers expect some degree of flexible roles between their head and AP, rather than a stark division of labor. This is why teachers who reported no gaps between leaders who both exhibited high levels of justice

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

were associated with positive organizational commitment outcomes. Principals and APs could strategize together how to enact their distinct duties in ways that enhance interpersonal justice during evaluation-related tasks (e.g., an AP showing genuine interest when observing a teacher's lesson) and procedural justice during cultural/institutional tasks (e.g., a principal being transparent about how decisions were made to allocate resources and support to teachers in response to external pressures or requests).

Concerning leadership preparation programs, our findings suggest increased curricular attention to the roles of APs, especially how they may approach their leadership tasks in a concerted manner with their principal so that the procedural and interpersonal justice enacted by both is optimal and consistent. Indeed, curricula in leadership preparation programs often lack the targeted focus on the APs' roles and their working relationship with principals (e.g., Goldring et al., 2021). To address this gap, leadership preparation classes could invite practicing head principals and APs as guest speakers to share their experiences in coordinating their distinct duties. This approach would allow candidates to gain firsthand insights into effective task coordination. Consequently, leadership preparation programs can better illustrate the dilemmas and challenges of principal-AP relationships through real-world cases and discussions.

### **Implications for District Policymakers and PD Providers**

In terms of implications for district policymakers and in-service PD providers, our findings point to a need for greater training and standardization in the task of teacher evaluation for both principals and APs. The results from our study suggest that teachers perceive discrepancies in how they are evaluated by their head and APs, but that they prefer fewer discrepancies between the two authorities. Our finding of disparities in perceptions of fair evaluation from principal and AP also advances distributed leadership (DL) theory, as teachers'

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

perceptions of distributed leadership in their schools have not been the focus of DL studies to date (Hickey et al., 2022). Using teacher organizational commitment as an outcome of interest to school administrators and organizations, our finding suggests that discrepancies in teachers' perceptions of leaders may undermine the efficacy of distributed leadership.

Since both head and APs performed evaluations at all schools in our sample, it is not simply the case that APs mattered more to teachers for procedural justice because they were the ones doing the evaluations. Given the relevance of the procedural justice construct to evaluation in educational settings, as well as our emphasis on multiple potential observers of teacher performance (i.e., principal and AP), our findings inform research about interrater reliability on teacher evaluation instruments. This line of research acknowledges the need for increased validity and fairness in teacher evaluations across multiple raters of their performance (Holcomb et al., 2022).

Considering these findings and their connection to prior research, we suggest two tangible actions districts can take:

1. Since state and/or district policy commonly dictates how many times per year a teacher should be observed, districts could establish procedures that support interrater consistency, such as encouraging both administrators to evaluate the same lesson (or chronologically close lessons) early in the school year. This can help leaders calibrate their process of evaluation to be more consistent across raters.
2. To further support consistency in instructional, operational, and school climate-related facets of school leadership, districts should make time for and develop PD sessions that provide training to both administrators in the same training sessions.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL VS. ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

PD providers may also develop observation and evaluation protocols based on the state's or district's teacher evaluation standards. The protocols should include articulated guidelines on evidence collection, observation frequency, and ways to address inter-rater reliability.

As our qualitative and quantitative findings suggest, the fairness and consistency exhibited by principals and APs are paramount for individual (teacher) outcomes. In turn, the dynamics between teachers and administrators are likely consequential for the productivity of the staff as a body and the quality of the educational service provided.



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### **Author Biographies**

**Jennifer L. Nelson** is an assistant professor in the Department of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign. Previously an IES postdoctoral fellow at Vanderbilt University, she earned her PhD in Sociology at Emory University. She studies how aspects of organizational environments in schools and universities, such as demographic composition, leadership practices, spatial arrangements, and organizational change, shape educators' work experiences and outcomes.

**Joonkil Ahn** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies and Practice at the University of Arizona. He earned his Ph.D. in Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. His scholarship examines how leadership as an organizational quality shapes staff development and student learning outcomes. His research is broadly categorized within the following two strands: (1) the measurement of educational constructs (e.g., leadership, deficit-laden practices) and their impact on students and teachers, and (2) racial equity in STEM education, leadership practice, and leadership preparation.

**Karen A. Hegtvedt** is a professor of sociology at Emory University. Her work, focusing on perceptions of and responses to injustice, has appeared in an array of journals. Current collaborative research examines the antecedents to legitimacy gains by authorities in the workplace and factors affecting perceptions of environmental justice. She coedited *Social Psychology Quarterly*, coauthored of *Social Psychology: Individuals, Interaction, and Inequality* (2025, 2nd edition), and won the 2023 Cooley-Mead Lifetime Achievement Award from the Social Psychology Section of the American Sociological Association.