

The Leaders Behind the Instructional Leaders: A Literature Review of Principal Supervisors as a Lever for Anti-Racism

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a literature review examining the role of principal supervisors through the lens of anti-racist district leadership (Shah et al., 2022). Analysis of peer-reviewed studies and professional standards revealed that research on principal supervisors largely emphasizes technical functions like coaching and evaluation while neglecting the racialized dimensions of these practices. Similarly, professional standards often invoked “equity” in vague terms, with minimal engagement with race, racism, or anti-racist competencies. Few professional standards addressed the structural redistribution of resources needed to remedy entrenched anti-Black inequities in school funding and instructional quality. These findings highlight a significant gap in the literature and professional standards, raising questions about whether and how principal supervisors are poised to support principals in anti-racist practices. We argue for more robust, race-conscious research, clearer professional standards, and aligned policy efforts to develop principal supervisors as agents of anti-racist change—especially in a sociopolitical climate increasingly hostile to educational equity.

Keywords

principal supervisors; anti-racist leadership; supervision; instructional leadership

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Introduction

Over the past decade, school principals have been recast as instructional leaders. At the same time, so too have those that supervise them. Known as “principal supervisors,” the role of these leaders-behind-the-leaders has similarly shifted from supporting principals’ operational roles to supporting principals’ instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2018). Due to their unique role at the intersection of central offices and schools, principal supervisors are a potentially powerful lever to support school principals in cultivating anti-racist leadership across districts. But to what extent are principal supervisors considered as such? In this article, we present findings from a literature review of research and professional standards concerning the principal supervisor role, asking to what extent research and professional standards address and support principal supervisors as a lever for anti-racism in schools. Specifically, we examined peer-reviewed articles and professional standards using the theory of *anti-racism for mid-level district leaders* (Shah et al., 2022), offering the first race-conscious literature review in this research area.

We found that research on principal supervisors focused on technical aspects of the principal supervisor role—coaching, evaluation, and instructional leadership—without addressing racialized dynamics. And, while some professional standards referenced “equity,” few explicitly engaged race, racism, or articulated anti-racist competencies for principal supervisors. Even fewer addressed structural changes necessary to redistribute resources in ways that would rectify existing anti-Black funding and instructional inequities in districts and schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006). These gaps suggest limited emphasis on principal supervisors as a lever for anti-racist change in the extant literature. There is thus a need to advance research on effective anti-racist practices among principal supervisors, clarify and align professional standards, and create policy that foregrounds race-conscious approaches to leadership development for principal supervisors cognizant of the resource distribution needed to rectify racialized inequities (Diem & Welton, 2020; Gooden et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Doing so could strengthen these uniquely positioned leaders as key agents in the pursuit of racial equity in schools, particularly amid growing U.S. political resistance to anti-racist education and educational opportunity.

Literature Review

Despite decades of reform efforts, racial inequities persist in American schools, with Black students in particular consistently experiencing inequitable educational conditions and outcomes. These disparities manifest in multiple ways: Black students face suspension rates nearly four times higher than white students (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022), are systematically underrepresented in gifted programs and advanced coursework (Ford et al., 2018), experience lower graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and are more likely to be taught by inexperienced or out-of-field teachers (Goldhaber et al., 2023). These persistent inequities reflect systemic racism within educational institutions and require intentional, sustained efforts at all levels to dismantle these barriers (Dumas, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). At the same time, research consistently demonstrates that school principals are pivotal in shaping school conditions that perpetuate or challenge racial inequities. Through their leadership, principals directly impact school climate (Sebastian et al., 2016), teacher hiring and retention (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019), disciplinary

policies (DeMatthews et al., 2021), instructional focus, and student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021). Principals, then, are a powerful lever for equity work in schools.

When principals intentionally prioritize equity through inclusive environments and anti-racist practices, schools show measurable improvements in outcomes for Black students and other historically marginalized groups (DeMatthews, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). The imperative for principals to engage in anti-racist leadership has never been more evident. Anti-racist leadership, defined as practices that explicitly challenge white supremacy and anti-Blackness, requires principals transcend surface-level diversity initiatives to address systemic barriers and transform school cultures (Horsford et al., 2019; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020). This transformative work requires principals to develop critical consciousness, systematically confront bias in policies and practices, and deliberately redistribute power and resources to achieve equity (Brooks & Watson, 2019; Rigby et al., 2022).

As principals take on the complex work of anti-racist school transformation, the role of those who support and develop these leaders, referred to as principal supervisors, becomes increasingly critical. Yet, there are surprisingly few answers as to how those who supervise principals can best support principals' equity work. Through a review of principal supervisor research, we reveal that while research has focused on the roles, responsibilities, and practices of principal supervisors, it has done so in a way that has failed to consider the racialized nature of these practices. Existing research points to organizational routines that supervisors can enact and can influence, yet these routines remain regarded in race-neutral terms. This approach stands in stark contrast to the growing recognition that educational leadership must explicitly address racism and anti-Blackness in schools (Diem & Welton, 2020; Dumas, 2016; Gooden et al., 2018). In the next sections, we define principal supervisors and offer an overview of their role in schools, before explaining the framework and methods used to conduct this review.

The Principal Supervisor

We define principal supervisors as those who directly oversee, evaluate, and/or coach school principals (Casserly et al., 2013). As the role is relatively new, terminology varies across districts and may include principal supervisors, principal managers, and instructional superintendents. It is estimated that approximately 600 principal supervisors are employed across 70 of the nation's large urban school districts (Cochran et al., 2020). Whereas some districts have just one or two principal supervisors, larger districts may have several dozen (Cochran et al., 2020). On average, a given principal supervisor manages 16 school principals (Cochran et al., 2020). Principal supervisors typically oversee principal coaching and evaluation across crucial areas for student outcomes, including instruction, district policies, operations, school culture, and school discipline (Casserly, 2013; Goldring et al., 2018). Because of the scope of their influence, principal supervisors are a primary link between central offices and school buildings (Rogers et al., 2019). Principal supervisors serve as a critical bridge between district administration and school-based leadership, occupying a unique position that enables them to translate district initiatives into school-level change.

Principal supervisors are important in developing principals' instructional leadership capacity in particular (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Rogers et al., 2019). When it comes to how they carry out

their work, principal supervisors cultivate school improvement by building trust and partnerships with principals (Thessin, 2019), model reflective learning (Lochmiller, 2018), and foster a culture of continuous improvement within schools (Weiner & Woulfin, 2019). Their multifaceted support of school principals often includes school and classroom walk-throughs, development and monitoring school action plans, and coordinating professional development to improve student outcomes (Goldring et al., 2020).

The Wallace Foundation's research has catalyzed a significant shift in understanding the principal supervisor role, emphasizing its critical function in strengthening school instructional leadership. Studies of efforts to redefine this role in several large school districts have demonstrated positive outcomes, with principals feeling more adequately guided and evaluated by their supervisors. While these changes have enhanced central office responsiveness to school needs, districts continue to grapple with actualizing this evolved supervisory role (Goldring et al., 2018). A significant challenge in maximizing the impact of principal supervisors lies in their preparation for the role. As the Council of Chief State School Officers (2015) notes, "No matter who is supervising, they often lack the right training and support to help principals build their own capacity as instructional leaders. While most principal supervisors are former principals who understand the complexity of the job, they aren't necessarily prepared to advise or coach principals...a very different skillset" (CCSSO, p. 2). This preparation gap becomes even more critical when considering the sophisticated skills required to support principals in dismantling systemic inequities and implementing anti-racist practices—work that demands coaching expertise and a deep understanding of racial equity leadership. Through their oversight of multiple schools and their influence on principal development, these supervisors are positioned to serve as catalysts for systemic anti-racist change. While research has established *school principals* as critical levers for anti-racism and educational equity (Grissom et al., 2021), questions remain as to if and how *principal supervisors* are regarded as such.

A Lack of Principal Supervision Literature Focused on Anti-Racism

With this question in mind, we sought to identify any existing literature reviews concerning principal supervisors, equity, and anti-racism. We learned that while scholarship on principal supervisors has increased over the past decade, there was a striking absence of literature reviews on the role, and none examining anti-racism specifically. Existing literature reviews examined technical aspects including roles and responsibilities while overlooking crucial questions of race, anti-racism, and equity (Tahir et al., 2023). This absence is especially concerning given the growing evidence of principals' influence on equity outcomes (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014) and otherwise compelling evidence that educational leadership practices significantly impact outcomes for students of color (Brooks & Watson, 2019).

The absence of such research in principal supervision becomes even more glaring when juxtaposed against the substantial body of race-conscious and equity-centered literature reviews in related fields including principal leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016) and teacher education (Sleeter, 2017). For example, comprehensive reviews have documented how effective principal leadership improves outcomes for marginalized students (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2020) and how teacher preparation programs can systematically address racial equity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). Furthermore, these works provide methodological frameworks for examining leadership

through an equity lens and demonstrate the feasibility and necessity of centering race in educational leadership research—making the gap in principal supervision literature even more significant. This gap motivated our review with explicit attention to race and anti-racism implications. Our review aimed to understand the current state of knowledge about principal supervision and how existing research and professional standards address—or fail to address—issues of race and anti-racism.

Conceptual Framework

To examine the extant literature, we sought a framework that could help us consider the specific position of principal supervisors as employees connecting central offices and schools. Shah et al.'s (2022) framework of *anti-racism for mid-level district leadership*, brings a race-conscious lens to those working at the central office level, and was adopted for our study. The framework offers three essential “knowledge areas” for mid-level leaders. First, an understanding of race and racialization provides leaders with models for how racial identities influence access and opportunity. Second, knowledge of structural racism and intersecting oppressions help leaders recognize how racism embeds itself in policies and practices—from school discipline and academic tracking to hiring processes—and how other systems (like housing) contribute to educational inequities. Third, leaders must understand how whiteness manifests in institutional culture, both through norms (such as minimizing racial inequities in meetings) and practices (like denying requests for race-related data).

The framework also emphasizes five key capacities for anti-racist leadership. *Visioning* involves both embracing education's potential to redress historical wrongs and demonstrating an unwavering commitment to all children's learning. *Community engagement* requires building relationships with school boards, sharing power with community organizations, and creating accountability structures. *Coalition building* focuses on developing networks of like-minded colleagues and allies across departments and roles. *Facilitating difficult conversations* involves leveraging political capital for professional learning about race, supporting research-to-practice connections, and explicitly addressing various forms of racism (anti-Black, anti-Indigenous) while managing resistance. Finally, *structural change* requires leaders to align resources and systems to reverse racial inequities, from reducing exclusionary discipline to implementing leadership development programs for staff members of color. Throughout these capacities, supervisors can leverage positional power strategically to ask hard questions, address corruption, seize opportunities for change, and ensure marginalized voices guide decision-making.

Table 1. *Anti-Racism for Mid-Level District Leadership*

Knowledge [specific content]	Description
Race and racialization	Knowledge of how social identities are afforded or denied access and opportunity; Self-awareness of how one learns, resists, and responds to feelings of racial discomfort; understanding one's "why" for anti-racist work; Knowledge that whiteness is an ideology that white people and people of color can propagate, i.e., "racial identity does not predict racial literacy or consciousness regarding how power operates institutionally" (p. 465).
Structural racism and intersecting oppressions	Knowledge that schools have been a historical and contemporary mechanism through which racism (anti-Black, anti-Indigenous) has been reproduced; knowledge of the structures, practices, and policies through which racism is embedded; knowledge of how other systems intersect with education in ways that undergird racial inequality (e.g., housing and healthcare),
Logics of whiteness	The ways whiteness subverts anti-racism: stalling, denying, ignoring, minimizing racial injustice, de-racializing and universalizing, not responding to requests for accountability; protecting racist leaders; cultural values emphasizing cohesion, control, hierarchy, outcomes over people).
Capacities [Norms and Skills]	
Visioning	Modeling the humanizing of children of color with principals and school staff; asserting as a priority the potential of all children to succeed; articulating conceptualizations of education as a mechanism to redress historic wrongs; Conceptualizing leadership as a collective, intergenerational project and related actions.
Organizing and collectivizing	Building relationships between communities and the school board; sharing power with community organizations; creating structures for the communities to hold districts accountable; leveraging outside pressure for goals of racial and intersecting justices.
Facilitating difficult learning	Sustained professional learning about race and racism; supporting principals and teachers in translating research and theories into everyday practices; explicitly naming power, difference, oppression, types of racisms (anti-Black, anti-Indigenous), and shared anti-racist terminology; expecting and addressing resistance to anti-racism.
Sustaining	Mid-level leaders leveraging their positional power to create informal

accountability for Racial justice	mechanisms; directing hard questions and calling out corruption with supervisors and boards; and using external crises for opportunities for district change; advocating for processes that ensure most marginalized are centered in decision-making.
Aligning resources and creating anti-racist structures	Vertically and horizontally aligning district/schools financial, programmatic, and human resource structures to reverse racial inequities; programs that create access and opportunity for students of color; coaching, mentorship, supports, and leadership development for staff of color.
Sustaining the self, sustaining the collective	Finding like-minded colleagues for strategic and interpersonal support; building alliances and community across anti-racist department staff and school board members; investing in communities and sources of support and healing.

Methods

In order to learn if and how principal supervisors are conceptualized and positioned as catalysts for anti-racist change, we conducted a review of research and standards literature on principal supervisors. To identify research studies, we searched the following terms in our University's online library database: "Principal supervisor," and "Principal" + "Supervisor" focusing on publications within the past 15 years. We identified 16 publications including research articles, dissertations, and reports, plus nine publicly available sets of professional standards. Documents included in the review are indicated in the reference list with an asterisk (*). In terms of analysis, following Onwuegbuzie et al.'s (2011) methodological approach, we analyzed published documents to synthesize existing knowledge about principal supervision through an anti-racist lens. We recognize this may not constitute the entirety of literature on principal supervisors as the field is still emerging. However, it does include a set of high-profile national and peer-reviewed studies that provide an initial set of professional standards to aid future analyses.

For all publications, we used a 'presence' and 'absence' coding scheme for terms related to anti-racism and race, as well as adjacent concepts including equity, culture, and inclusion. Specifically, for research studies, we coded each document to understand the types of research questions asked, methods used, and findings. We also coded professional standards for the use of these terms. These presence/absence codes were entered into a spreadsheet to track patterns among terminology across documents. We used these initial quantitative trends as a launching point for further investigation into how the terms were being used. This resulted in a substantive assessment of how documents engaged these terms, rather than merely relying on patterns of code frequency, which may obscure the depth or extent to which the terms anti-racism, race, equity was systematically or consequentially incorporated as part of research designs and standards. For instance, we were aware that the terms themselves might appear in documents but be disconnected from critical research design components (e.g., conceptual frameworks and analysis methods) or, among professional standards, concrete practices with aligned mechanisms for implementation. We then created written summaries about the patterns

observed in research studies and in professional standards and compared them to our theoretical framework to evaluate the treatment of anti-racist leadership.

Findings

Our analysis revealed three key findings. First, existing research on principal supervisors focuses on technical aspects of the role specifically: responsibilities, partnerships, and organizational conditions that enable or inhibit supervisor effectiveness. Second, despite the emphasis on racial equity in educational leadership more broadly, research examining principal supervision through a race-conscious or anti-racist lens remains notably sparse. Third, while the research literature demonstrates this significant gap, professional standards at national and state levels have begun to incorporate language around racial equity and anti-racism, though often through broadly conceived notions of “equity” rather than explicitly anti-racist language. This disconnection between research and standards becomes particularly salient when analyzed through our theoretical framework of anti-racism for mid-level district leadership. The knowledge and capacities necessary for anti-racist leadership—including understanding racialization processes, recognizing structural racism, and developing skills for facilitating difficult conversations about race—remain largely unexamined in the empirical literature. This gap presents opportunities for future research and suggests the need for a more robust integration of anti-racist frameworks in both scholarly investigations and professional standards. Next, we discuss each finding in depth.

Research Theme #1: An Emphasis on Roles and Responsibilities

Existing research extensively describes the roles and responsibilities of principal supervisors (see Table 2). For instance, an early study by Corcoran et al. (2013) identified key responsibilities of the role, including school visitation, facilitation of instructional dialogue among principals, evaluation, coaching, and professional development leadership. These supervisory responsibilities encompassed support for multiple dimensions of school leaders, including data-driven performance analysis, classroom observation protocols, teacher evaluation oversight, and community relations management. Longitudinal analysis by Cochran et al. (2020) demonstrated that supervisors’ engagement in performance-related activities either increased or remained stable over time and an intensifying focus on instructional leadership support. This evolution reflects systemic investments in transforming the principal supervisor role from its traditional compliance-oriented focus to one centered on instructional leadership development. This transformation demands a fundamental shift in supervisory practice, moving beyond mere information dissemination to embracing a sophisticated teaching and learning approach that actively engages principals’ metacognitive development (Corcoran et al., 2013; Goldring et al., 2018, 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2019). Typically, districts implementing this transformed supervisory model provided comprehensive professional development focused on essential competencies: advanced coaching techniques, frameworks for delivering actionable feedback, and protocols for conducting meaningful observations and school walkthroughs.

Research has also focused on successful supervisor-principal relationships, characterized by some as “joint work” (Thessin, 2019). This joint work encompassed collaborative planning, shared problem-solving, coordinated professional development design, and systematic reflection on practice. Through these collaborative practices, supervisors serve dual roles as strategic

thought partners and metacognitive coaches for principals. While the literature has surfaced these productive dynamics, research has also identified organizational barriers to effective supervision. Rogers (2022) delineated three primary challenges, including: internal misalignment of central office expectations, role conflicts imposed by competing central office initiatives, and insufficient role clarity, particularly regarding the conceptualization of instructional leadership.

Research Theme #2: The Absence of Race and Anti-Racism

A focal point of our inquiry, our analysis revealed a striking disconnect between the extensive literature on principal supervisors' roles and recognition of race in educational leadership. This gap was notable given the robust body of educational leadership research demonstrating the deeply racialized nature of leadership practices and the importance of equity-centered principals (Gooden et al., 2023; Khalifa et al., 2016; Rigby et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2022). Our review indicated that while most studies addressed research questions of general characteristics, roles, responsibilities, changes in roles, and evaluation of principal supervisors, there has been infrequent consideration of race, anti-racism, and equity. Large-scale surveys investigating supervisor training and development emphasized technical aspects of leadership, such as instructional assessment, achievement metrics, data analysis, and coaching techniques. These surveys often omit questions about race and equity in general and fail to assess supervisors' capacity to address racial inequities or implement anti-racist practices. Thus, while educational leadership as a field has established the link between effective leadership and racial equity work, research on principal supervisors has hardly begun to interrogate these crucial intersections.

Within this broader pattern of race-neutral research, however, three studies emerged as notable exceptions. Jones (2024) provided the single instance of race-conscious research specifically concerning the ways in which Black principal supervisors develop Black school principals. Jones found that Black supervisors enacted eight approaches to developing Black principals, including: recognizing Black leadership brilliance, opportunities in awareness, centering instruction, coaching and care, combating racial violations, centering student life outcomes, using inspiration, and having tough conversations about data. Jones noted these themes align with previous research on principal supervisors but further reveal the importance of race-conscious leadership and the praxis of Black district and school leadership in particular.

Emphasizing equity work in schools, Rigby et al.'s (2019) multi-district study of principal supervision centered on equity-focused leadership as a core analytical framework. Rigby et al.'s findings revealed that districts that achieved the most substantial equity outcomes explicitly incorporated race-conscious language and frameworks into their supervision practices. Their findings suggested that surface-level or race-neutral approaches to equity work may be insufficient for achieving meaningful change. Despite frequently framing principal supervision as equity-driven initiatives, there remains a gap in understanding how supervisors *do* equity work (Rogers, 2022). While differently focused, each of these studies demonstrated the feasibility of incorporating a race and equity conscious approach into principal supervision research.

Similarly, Castro (2021) studied principal supervision in the Southwest and the extent to which supervisors incorporated culturally responsive and social justice leadership into principal evaluation. Castro found that supervisors *partially* used culturally responsive and social justice

leadership in evaluation, but supervisors had different ideas of what those concepts meant, pointing to inconsistencies in operationalizing it as a supervision tool. Castro also found a range of professional developments offered that proxied this form of leadership, though nonetheless the focus was variable. While studies conducted by Jones (2024), Rigby et al. (2019), and Castro (2021) each had a different focus, they similarly interjected considerations of race, culture, equity, and justice into an otherwise colorblind area of educational leadership.

The systematic exclusion of race in principal supervision research was further evidenced by the theoretical frameworks employed across the literature. Our analysis revealed that components of learning theory and organizational theory were readily used, including concepts such as situated learning, joint work, and coupling. However, these applications infrequently incorporated considerations of race, anti-racism, or equity into theoretical—and thus, research—design. While the frameworks used provided new insights into supervision, such as features of productive supervision partnerships (including supervisor credibility, supportive behaviors, and principal readiness for learning, (Thessin, 2019)), they did not make salient how cultural understanding, race-consciousness, and power dynamics shape these interactions (Shah et al., 2022). This critique is not meant to diminish the value of existing theoretical approaches but rather highlights the absence of those that examine race, culture, and equity in leadership development and organizational change (Lee, 2009; Ray, 2019).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, within this landscape of theoretical approaches, those studies that *did* address issues of race and equity incorporated complementary frameworks. For instance, Jones' study of Black principal supervisors was premised on the use of Critical Race Theory. Rigby et al.'s (2019) analysis of equitable leadership employed Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) "equitable leadership." Rigby et al. (2019) used this framework to provide insight into the status and progression of equity work in district leadership. When applied along a continuum from "little to no equity" to "exemplary" practice (p. 489), the framework revealed significant variations in districts' capacity for equity-focused leadership. While some districts struggled with fundamental equity concepts, manifesting in problematic "us versus them" orientations toward students and communities, others demonstrated sophisticated approaches to equity leadership through intentional redistribution of power and systematic support for principals' equity-focused initiatives. In this way, Rigby et al. (2019) provide an example of how an equity-conscious framework can be leveraged to provide insights into the progression of district equity work.

This analysis of theoretical frameworks in principal supervision research revealed works that have primarily emphasized technical and organizational aspects of leadership while overlooking the racialized nature of educational leadership practices. While emerging scholarship has begun to explore equity-focused frameworks, there remains a critical need for theoretical approaches that explicitly examine principal supervisors as potential catalysts for anti-racist change in educational systems. Such theoretical development would align with our framework's emphasis on both the knowledge required to recognize systemic racism and the capacities needed to enact meaningful organizational transformation.

Professional Standard Theme #1: An Emphasis on Roles and Responsibilities

Our analysis of professional standards revealed a complex landscape of competency frameworks attempting to define and guide the work of principal supervisors. While varying in scope and specificity, these standards represented aspects of the field's formal articulation of supervisory expectations and professional development priorities. The Principal Supervisor Performance Standards (2017) exemplified this approach, presenting six core standards operationalized across five levels of practice. Notably, these standards explicitly excluded attitudinal and dispositional measures, with the authors citing measurement challenges and a perceived lack of empirical connection to principals' instructional leadership growth (p. 4).

The exclusion of dispositional factors, particularly those related to equity consciousness and anti-racist commitment, represented a limitation when viewed through our theoretical framework of anti-racist leadership. While these standards articulated three primary objectives: supporting equitable student outcomes, clarifying supervisory expectations for district leadership, and defining support parameters for principals (p. 3), their conceptualization of equity remained technical and procedural, lacking explicit attention to the knowledge and capacities our framework identifies as crucial for anti-racist leadership, thus leaving it contingent upon the individual to interpret. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) standards, published in 2015 as the first national framework for principal supervision, represented an example of codifying the profession's core competencies. The CCSSO standards delineated eight key domains: principal growth and development, coaching and support, evidence-based leadership, evaluation processes, organizational vision, cultural responsiveness and resource equity, professional development, and change management. While comprehensive in scope, our analysis through an anti-racist leadership lens revealed both possibilities and limitations in how these standards conceptualized equity-focused leadership, which will be addressed below.

Professional Standard Theme #2: An Emphasis on Equity

Documents varied in the degree, specificity, and commitment to addressing systemic racism and notably relied on 'equity' to convey a sense of consideration for marginalized students. The CCSSO standards exemplified this pattern in their treatment of "equity-minded" leadership, which they defined as ensuring "all students are treated fairly" with "access to excellent teachers and necessary resources" (p. 9). While this language superficially aligned with our framework's emphasis on resource allocation, it reflected what critical race scholars have identified as a "color-evasive" approach to equity: acknowledging disparities while avoiding explicit engagement with race, racial dynamics, and systemic racism (Annamma et al., 2017). This color-evasive approach was particularly evident in how the standards conceptualized resource allocation. Rather than explicitly addressing the need to repair historical and ongoing racial harm and legally entrenched funding inequalities, a key element of our anti-racist leadership framework, the standards presented a generalized notion of "equitable resources" that lacked specific attention to racialized patterns of opportunity and access.

The implications of this ambiguity are significant. By leaving the identification of inequities to reader interpretation, the standards create space for multiple, potentially competing definitions of equity that may divert attention from the urgent need to address racialized opportunity gaps. In

other words, when equity is up to individual interpretation, it will likely regress to race-neutral practices that benefit white, affluent, and otherwise historically privileged students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This ambiguity reflected the tendency to employ race-neutral terminology in ways that may inadvertently preserve existing power structures while appearing to address inequity. Throughout the standards, terms like “equity-minded,” “cultural competency,” and “cultural learning needs” were woven into supervisory expectations; for instance, the requirement that supervisors “exhibit cultural competency in interactions and decision-making with principals and community” (p. 20). While debates about the specificity of racial/ethnic terminology in policy documents remain ongoing, our theoretical framework suggests that such ambiguity often serves to maintain existing power structures. More concerning, this lack of specificity can be easily used to direct resources away from historically marginalized communities through claims of “reverse discrimination” or majority group disadvantage, a phenomenon that directly contradicted the anti-racist leadership capacities our framework identified as essential for systemic change and an ideology increasingly resurging in the current political landscape.

Further analysis of district-level standards revealed additional complexities in conceptualizing and operationalizing equity. Modesto City Schools’ Principal Supervisors Evaluation Handbook (n.d.)—a comprehensive 46-page document encompassing evaluation frameworks, leadership competencies, and implementation resources—offered a particularly illustrative example of how district-level standards attempted to translate equity principles into practice. While the handbook’s action-oriented approach included rating supervisor practices on a continuum from ineffective to highly effective suggested a commitment to measurable equity outcomes, its conceptualization of equity revealed a theoretical limitation. The handbook defined equity as “the standard of support that will be provided based on *the individual need* of a student to ensure they have the access and support they require to achieve at high levels” (p. 45). This individualistic framing was directly tied to our theoretical framework’s emphasis on addressing *systemic* group racial inequities and transforming institutional structures. The contrast between Modesto’s individualized approach and CCSSO’s group-based framework highlights a fundamental tension in how educational standards conceptualize equity work. While CCSSO’s attention to historically marginalized groups at least acknowledges systemic inequities as a group-based phenomenon, Modesto’s individualistic framework risks obscuring the structural nature of racial discrimination and inequality. This theoretical divergence has implications for how supervisors might approach anti-racist leadership in practice.

Professional Standard Theme #3: Evidence of Anti-Racism

The Massachusetts Department of Education’s framework (2021) stood as an exemplar of anti-racist leadership principles in supervisory standards. Unlike other frameworks’ broad equity language, Massachusetts explicitly positioned principal supervisors, termed ‘principal mentors’, as catalysts charged with “supporting and coaching anti-racist administrators.” At its foundation, the framework articulated a clear purpose: to “disrupt historical patterns of racial inequity by equipping current and aspiring district and school leaders with the tools, resources, and supports to successfully fulfill key strategic priorities...through the lens of equity-focused leadership” (p. 3). This mission was operationalized through four interconnected modules focused on equity in Professional and Inclusive Culture, Instructional Leadership, and Human Capital Development.

The framework's comprehensive structure included detailed terminology, learning modules, implementation timelines, and targeted resources, delineating three essential supervisory roles: (1) equity-focused expertise, (2) interpersonal skills for facilitating race-conscious dialogue, and (3) capacity to transform school and system conditions. These components systematically integrated both knowledge and capacity dimensions of anti-racist leadership. Knowledge development was addressed through explicit directives for supervisors to support principals in "acknowledging and reflecting on the historical and social role of schools and schooling in perpetuating causal inequities due to individual and systemic racism" (p. 12). This precise attention to developing a critical consciousness about educational institutions' role in perpetuating racial inequities distinguished it from the broader equity language common in other standards. The framework's approach to capacity development emphasized concrete skills across multiple domains including facilitating difficult conversations, resource allocation, curriculum and instruction, human resources.

Through this comprehensive integration of knowledge development and practical capacity building, the Massachusetts framework provided a sophisticated model for how professional standards can explicitly center race and anti-racism in leadership development. Its detailed attention to both theoretical understanding and concrete implementation strategies creates a blueprint for transformative anti-racist leadership development. Across the documents, this framework offered an example of anti-racism for mid-level leadership connected to the principal supervisor role that was unique in its explicitness and specificity.

Discussion

Guided by the goal of understanding principal supervisors as a lever for anti-racism, our assessment of available literature indicated that research thus far has focused on technical aspects of supervision, which, while valuable for understanding role mechanics, has systematically overlooked the racialized nature of educational leadership. This whitewashed approach to studying supervision represented more than a simple oversight; it reflected and reinforced what our theoretical framework identifies as institutional patterns of avoiding explicit engagement with race and racism. Those studies that centered race and equity demonstrated the feasibility of such an approach to supervision (Jones, 2024; Rigby et al., 2019).

Principal supervisors are crucial in shaping school operations, influencing everything from instruction and curriculum to personnel and discipline. While research has extensively documented their responsibilities, our findings highlight a persistent gap in how this role is conceptualized in addressing the needs of racially and culturally marginalized students. The methodological and theoretical approaches dominant in supervision research have systematically overlooked racial dimensions of leadership, resulting in significant gaps in our understanding of how supervision practices might advance, or impede, anti-racist change. Future research must examine both the *enacted* knowledge and competencies of district leaders related to race and anti-racism (extending Shah et al.'s work) and how organizational dynamics related to whiteness are imbued or resisted in mid-level leaders' policymaking and resource allocation (Bertrand & Sampson, 2022; Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Wiley et al., 2024).

While professional standards have begun incorporating equity language, our analysis reveals that most frameworks—with the notable exception of Massachusetts—lack the explicit race-consciousness crucial for transformative leadership (Shah et al., 2022). Most relied on race-evasive language that obscured rather than confronted systemic racism, a pattern that our theoretical framework identified as an institutional practice that maintains white dominance through superficial acknowledgment of inequity. The Massachusetts Department of Education's framework demonstrated how standards can explicitly center anti-racist leadership development, moving beyond generic equity language to specify both the knowledge and capacities supervisors need to facilitate systemic change. Their approach aligned with what Khalifa et al. (2016), Gooden et al. (2018), and Shah et al. (2022) identified as necessary components of anti-racist leadership: explicit attention to racial power dynamics, concrete strategies for redistributing resources, and specific practices for dismantling racialized barriers.

A particularly notable finding was the apparent disconnect between academic research and practitioner standards. While research remains relatively race-neutral and color-evasive, professional standards increasingly emphasized equity considerations, suggesting growing practitioner recognition of racial equity's centrality to educational leadership. Yet, further opportunities exist to incorporate anti-racist leadership into supervision, standards, training, and policy advocacy (see recommendations below). Given the increasingly hostile national federal climate to educational equity (Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2025), race and equity-conscious leadership standards developed at state and local levels and by non-governmental entities may offer an important buffer from federal targeting.

Looking ahead, our findings suggest several crucial directions for advancing anti-racist supervision. First, researchers must move beyond documenting the technical aspects of supervision to examine how supervisors might serve as catalysts for systemic anti-racist change. This shift requires new research questions and theoretical frameworks that explicitly center race and power in understanding supervisory practice. The Massachusetts framework provides one model for how standards might support this transformation, but more research is needed to understand how such frameworks *translate* into practice. Specific priorities for future research include: (1) empirical studies examining how supervisors develop and enact anti-racist knowledge and capacities in practice; (2) investigations of how organizational contexts enable or constrain supervisors' anti-racist leadership; (3) participatory research engaging multiple stakeholders in defining and measuring anti-racist supervision outcomes; and (4) implementation studies of how race-conscious frameworks like Massachusetts' translate into practice, see recommendations below. Such research must employ explicitly critical theoretical frameworks that foreground race, power, and systemic change (Doucet, 2019). Only through such intentional scholarly attention can we begin to realize principal supervision's potential as a lever for anti-racist transformation in education.

While our analysis draws on an extensive collection of highly cited publications and standards documents, we acknowledge the limitations. We prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles and national empirical reports and excluded book chapters and other publication formats which may challenge the conclusions drawn herein. Second, the practitioner standards offer only select insights into what might be a broader set of standards that we were unable to locate. We recommend a fifty-state review of existing supervision standards. The emergent nature of the

principal supervisor role means that new research and standards continue to develop, potentially offering additional insights beyond those captured in our review. This limitation points to the field's dynamic nature and the ongoing opportunity to shape principal supervision.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

We propose five areas for future research to consider, including: centering race and power in supervision studies, investigating observable anti-racist supervision practices, considerations of whiteness within central office dynamics, studies of whether anti-racism supervision efforts translate into meaningful changes for Black students and students of color, and, methodologically speaking, the use of participatory methods.

Research Recommendations

1. **Center race and power in supervision studies.** Future research should move beyond documenting the technical and managerial dimensions of principal supervision to examine how supervisors leverage anti-racist systemic change. This requires theoretical frameworks that foreground race, power, and institutional dynamics, addressing the field's long-standing color-evasive tendencies.
2. **Empirically investigate anti-racist supervisory practice.** Scholars should study how supervisors develop and enact anti-racist knowledge, beliefs, and capacities in practice. Such research should explore how supervisory actions influence instruction, curriculum, resource allocation, personnel decisions, and school culture—core mechanisms through which racial equity outcomes are shaped. Furthermore, explicit focus should be placed on understanding the approaches of Black principal supervisors in efforts to improve outcomes for Black principals (Jones, 2024).
3. **Examine organizational conditions and whiteness in central office leadership.** Building on Shah et al. (2022), Bertrand and Sampson (2022), and Diamond and Gomez (2023), researchers should investigate how district policies, norms, and organizational cultures enable or constrain race-conscious leadership. Attention to how whiteness operates within mid-level leadership structures is critical to understanding where resistance or transformation occurs.
4. **Conduct participatory implementation research.** Participatory approaches that engage supervisors, principals, and racially marginalized communities in co-defining and assessing anti-racist supervision are essential. Implementation studies should evaluate how race-conscious frameworks—such as Massachusetts'—are adopted, adapted, or resisted in practice, and with what impact.
5. **Bridge the gap between standards and scholarship.** Future studies should examine how evolving professional standards that reference equity translate into supervisory practice and measurable outcomes for Black students and students of color. This line of inquiry should assess whether equity-oriented language in standards produces substantive change or perpetuates symbolic, race-evasive reforms.

Practice Recommendations

We propose five areas of recommendations to support anti-racist supervision practice. These include the adoption of race-conscious supervision frameworks at the state and/or district level to support promotion and evaluation, as well as the alignment of anti-racist frameworks with competencies in professional standards (replacing race-neutral ones when present). Moreover, policy advocacy should be used to accomplish these goals, and, when necessary, institutional backing for supervisors to conduct anti-racist work should be provided.

1. **Adopt explicitly race-conscious supervision frameworks.** Districts should replace generic equity rhetoric with supervision frameworks that name and confront systemic racism. The Massachusetts model provides an example of explicitly defining the knowledge, dispositions, and leadership practices supervisors need to foster anti-racist school leadership.
2. **Integrate anti-racist competencies into professional standards and training.** Professional standards must require principal supervisors to demonstrate competencies in understanding racial power dynamics, redistributing resources equitably, and dismantling racialized barriers. Leadership preparation and professional learning should embed these competencies as core, not optional, dimensions of supervisory practice.
3. **Audit and revise race-evasive language in standards and policies.** State and district agencies should systematically review supervision frameworks for language that obscures or avoids naming race and racism. Replacing race-evasive terminology with explicit anti-racist commitments strengthens both accountability and clarity of purpose.
4. **Policy advocacy.** Advocate for district and state guidance and standards that utilize race-conscious supervision frameworks and to put resources into action to support leaders engaged in this work. Collaboration among scholars, professional associations, and district leaders is needed to close the gap between practitioner standards and the research base. Joint inquiry and co-designed professional learning can ensure that standards are informed by critical scholarship and grounded in authentic leadership contexts.
5. **Cultivate supervisors as system-level change agents.** Principal supervisors should be supported and held accountable as system-level leaders who influence district-wide conditions for racial equity. They require access to disaggregated racial data, authority over key resource decisions, and institutional backing to challenge race-evasive or inequitable practices.

Conclusion

Principal supervision represents a potentially powerful, yet underexamined, lever for advancing racial equity in education. Situated between district policy and school practice, principal supervisors influence nearly every dimension of school functioning—from instructional improvement to hiring, resource allocation, and organizational culture. This positionality places them in a uniquely strategic role to disrupt the racialized patterns that persist in schooling. Yet, our analysis reveals that research and standards have largely treated supervision as a technical exercise rather than a site for anti-racism. The absence of explicit attention to race and power in the supervision literature mirrors broader institutional tendencies to depoliticize educational leadership and maintain race-evasive norms. While professional standards have increasingly

incorporated the language of equity, this rhetorical shift has not consistently translated into race-conscious practice. The Massachusetts framework demonstrates the feasibility and necessity of articulating anti-racist competencies for supervisors—providing a model for how systems can move beyond symbolic equity commitments to structural transformation. Still, the gap between scholarly inquiry and practitioner standards persists.

Realizing the transformative potential of principal supervision requires both conceptual and structural shifts. Researchers must center race and power in future studies, developing evidence that illuminates how supervisors enact or resist anti-racist leadership in their daily work. Simultaneously, practitioners and policymakers must ensure that professional standards, training, and evaluation systems explicitly develop supervisors' capacity to recognize and challenge racial inequities. Advancing anti-racist supervision is not simply an academic imperative but a moral and systemic one for realizing and protecting educational opportunities for historically marginalized students.

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