

From Rookie to All Star: Identifying Critical Workplace
Experiences in a School Principal's
Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have seen a shortage of qualified secondary school principals. Retirements and an accelerated rate of attrition from the ranks of school leadership has exacerbated this shortage, necessitating an urgency to understand the factors that facilitate the professional development and growth of the next generation of school leaders. The purpose of this study was to use the principles of andragogy and experiential learning to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the educational and job-embedded experiences that contribute to the development of the skills necessary for assistant principals to advance successfully to the principalship. A phenomenological qualitative research design incorporating focus group interviews and surveys was selected. The participants in this study included 10 entry-year secondary school assistant principals and 10 experienced secondary school principals from the State of Ohio. Participants responded to interview questions exploring constructs related to professional background, post-graduate principal licensure program preparation, influential mentors, and critical on-the-job experiences. The findings of the study identified specific job embedded experiences, specifically those involving crises that occur during the entry-year of a secondary school assistant principal as the most impactful professional growth opportunities available to beginning administrators. The findings also provide participant descriptions of the positive and negative aspects of the principal preparation and licensure process. The comprehensive descriptions of the job-embedded experiences and educational experiences may serve to inform the development of the clinical internship requirements of principal licensure programs and provide experienced principals guidance in the mentorship of entry year assistant principals.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Research Design	8
Significance of Study.....	10
Assumptions	12
Limitations	14
Delimitations	15
Operational Definitions.....	17
Summary	19
II REVIEW OF LITERATURE	21
Theoretical Framework.....	22
Andragogy	22
Experiential Learning.....	27
Current Literature on Principalship	32
The Role of the School Principal.....	32
Principal Preparation.....	37
Standards and Best Practices	38

University-based Principal Preparation Programs.....	53
Impact of the Building Principal on Student Outcomes.....	58
A Shortage of Candidates.....	60
The Assistant Principal.....	62
The Relationship of the Principal and Assistant Principal.....	68
The Impact of Gender.....	70
The Role of Succession Programs in Principal Preparation.....	71
The Role of Mentorship in Principal Preparation.....	72
Learning Through Experience.....	75
Summary.....	80
III METHODOLOGY.....	82
Research Purpose.....	83
Research Questions.....	83
Research Question 1.....	84
Research Question 2.....	84
Research Question 3.....	84
Research Study Design.....	84
Sampling and Selection.....	85
Participants.....	85
Beginning Administrators Mentorship Academy (BAMA).....	86
School District Typology.....	87
Mentors.....	88
Beginning Administrators.....	89

Sample Size	91
Sampling Procedures	92
Experienced Secondary School Principals	93
Entry-Year Secondary School Assistant Principals	94
Data Collection	98
Data Sources	98
Instruments	98
Focus Group Interview Protocols	99
Experienced Principals	100
Entry-Year Assistant Principals	103
Survey Instrument	107
Data Collection Process	107
Data Analysis	112
Data Coding	115
Data Storage	116
Trustworthiness	116
Participant Involvement	118
Triangulation	119
Member Checking	120
Contextual Completeness	120
Chain of Evidence	121
Ethics	122
Researcher Stance	122

Summary	127
IV. FINDINGS.....	128
Research Questions.....	129
Research Question 1.....	129
Research Question 2.....	129
Research Question 3.....	129
Participants.....	130
Experienced Principals.....	130
Entry-Year Assistant Principals.....	131
Sample Size	131
Perception of District Typology Impact.....	132
Findings.....	133
The Path to the Principalship.....	134
Influential People or Factors.....	137
Principal Licensure Program Experience	141
Primary Responsibilities.....	150
Perceptions of Preparation.....	153
Entry-Year “On-the-Job” Experiences.....	155
Assigned or Spontaneous Experience	160
Mentorship.....	162
Entry-Year “On-the-Job” Experiences: Mentor Perspective.....	163
Answering the Research Questions	167
Research Question 1.....	168

Research Question 2.....	170
Research Question 3.....	171
Survey Results.....	173
Research Question 1.....	175
Research Question 2.....	176
Research Question 3.....	177
The Impact of Participant Gender on the Findings.....	178
V DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	179
Introduction.....	179
Summary of the Findings.....	182
The Eight Constructs.....	182
Answering the Research Questions.....	184
Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings.....	188
Discussion of Research Constructs.....	189
Discussion of Themes and Descriptions.....	212
Research Question 1.....	213
Research Question 2.....	215
Research Question 3.....	218
Limitations.....	221
Recommendations for Future Research.....	223
Summative Discussion and Implications of This Study.....	225
REFERENCES.....	236
APPENDICES.....	255

APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR EXPERIENCED PRINCIPALS	256
APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR ENTRY-YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS	257
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT	258
APPENDIX D. RESEARCH FOCUS GROUP SEATING CHART	261
APPENDIX E. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET ..	262
APPENDIX F. ANDRAGOGY AND ADULT LEARNING THEORY SCRIPT	263
APPENDIX G. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	265
APPENDIX H. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS- A/B.....	269
APPENDIX I. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS- C/D	271
APPENDIX J. SURVEY INSTRUMENT	273
APPENDIX K. IRB APPROVAL LETTER	278

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
4.1 Demographic Composition of Focus Group Participants.....	132
4.2 Comparison of Themes Observed in Study Participant Responses	166
4.3 Mean Ratings of Survey Respondents to Research Question 1 Descriptions	175
4.4 Mean Ratings of Survey Respondents to Research Question 2 Descriptions	176
4.5 Mean Ratings of Survey Respondents to Research Question 3 Descriptions	177

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 Progression of thought in development of principal practice	50
3.1 Focus groups A and B selection flow chart.....	93
3.2 Focus groups C and D selection flow chart.....	95
4.1 Research question chart.....	168

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The road to the principalship is clearly paved by experience as an assistant principal. (Militello, Gadja, & Bowers, 2009, p. 195)

When examining the factors that may influence student success in school, the effectiveness of the school principal is second only to the effectiveness of the classroom teacher (Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Research confirms that strong school leaders make a difference in the success of schools that they lead (Fuller, Hollingworth, & An, 2016; Hattie, 2009; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Hattie (2009) identified and analyzed the separate factors that impact student achievement and calculated the effect size for each. The effectiveness of the principal has a positive effect size of .32, cited as a moderate effect on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Hattie (2009) stated that beyond the noted effect size, the performance of the principal has the capability of providing direct impact on a significant number of the other factors with positive effect sizes (Hattie, 2009). Research continues to provide evidence that principals strongly and directly influence student achievement (Fuller, Baker, and Young 2007; Shortridge 2015).

Historically, the responsibilities of the principal position have continued to grow from a point where leaders taught class in addition to a wide range of managerial tasks including the assignment of teaching duties, student discipline, maintenance of the school building, attendance of teachers and students, and ringing school bells to a point where the accepted view of the principal position had shifted from being the manager of a

school to one accountable for all aspects of instructional leadership (Brown, 2005; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007). The role of the school principal today has expanded from a role defined by basic managerial responsibilities to one with complete accountability for instructional leadership (Grissom, Loeb, & Mitani, 2015; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007). As the role continues to expand, attempts to identify the specific functions of the school principal have been limited by research methods that have incorporated large pools of study participants over short periods of time, neglecting the reality in the field that unpredictability and a seasonal fluctuation of duties often define the role (Camburn, Spillane, & Sebastian, 2010; Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008; Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013; Sebastian, Camburn, & Spillane, 2018; Spillane & Hunt, 2010). The responsibilities of school principals not only includes a wide range of daily duties, but also the requirement of social interaction and the probability of interpersonal conflict with the multiple constituents that a principal interacts with, making any valid attempt at fully defining the principal role difficult (Camburn et al., 2010; Grissom et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2015; May, Huff, & Goldring, 2012; Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007).

As researchers struggle to understand the evolving responsibilities of the school principal, the shift to an instructional leadership focus is evident (Huber, 2008; Militello et al., 2009; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Contemporary research on principalship is dominated by specific study of the principal in the role of instructional leader (Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2013; Sebastian et al., 2018). This identification of the principal as the instructional leader of the school building has added to the complexity of the job as public school policy reform has led to accountability measures specifically directed at the principal (Christie, Thompson, &

Whitely, 2009; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Grissom et al., 2015; Militello et al., 2009).

Nearly 50% of all newly hired principals vacate the role by their third year (Superville, 2014). Principals who leave the position often identify a deep-seated feeling that they lacked adequate preparation for the role of principal, making the process of preparing the principal for the challenges associated with the pressures of the job, vital to the success of tomorrow's schools (Superville, 2014). The performance-based evaluations, the layered accountability systems, and ever-changing mandates for school leaders has had a negative impact on the once well-entrenched dedication of school leaders, and subsequently serves to energize those responsible for preparing future school leaders to look for new strategies to prepare them (Fuller et al., 2016; Sun & Shoho, 2017).

Literature regarding guidance on the preparatory development of the principal is minimal, but what is available is primarily focused on the experienced principal developing specific instructional leadership skills (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee 2015). Levine (2005) stressed the importance that those responsible for principal preparation program development recognize that true principal preparation encompasses a continuum of experiences. Principal preparation requires very specific training (Vogel & Weiler, 2014). Critiques of educational leadership preparation programs argue that there is too much focus on general managerial tasks as opposed to the development of leadership skills (Phillips, 2013).

The assistant principal role is often identified as the necessary precursor to the principal position and a longstanding pathway to the principalship (Armstrong 2004;

Chan, Webb, & Bowen, 2003; Denmark & Davis 2000; Winter, 2002). The role and professional development of the assistant principal has been neglected in research (Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrink, 2004; Lopez, 2003; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Weller, & Weller, 2002). The role of the assistant principal is ill-defined and ambiguous, and as a result, the process of providing assistant principals with the necessary professional development and preparatory experiences to successfully advance to the principal position is ill-defined and ambiguous as well (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). The professional development pathways directed at instructional leadership for seated principals continue to evolve, while the professional development for assistant principal is frequently overlooked or excluded in the desired outcomes and descriptions (Oliver, 2005). A lack of clear understanding of the position of assistant principal adds to the confusion regarding ways to proactively address their professional growth (May, 2016; Rogers, 2009). Despite the lack of formal training, many assistant principals advance to the principal position (Armstrong, 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark & Davis, 2000; Militello et al., 2009; Winter, 2002).

When they entered the principal position, former assistant principals often stated that they were unprepared for the range of responsibilities and unprepared for the time commitment and pace (Busch, MacNeil, & Baraniuk, 2010; Kwan, 2009; May, 2016; Ng, 2013; Sackney & Walker 2006). However, principals who transitioned successfully to the principal role stated that they gained specific leadership competency through on-the-job experiences as an assistant principal (Oleszewski et al., 2012). While in the position, assistant principals must learn as much as possible about the principal position (Busch, MacNeil, & Baraniuk, 2010; May, 2016). Unfortunately, assistant principals are often

not provided adequate opportunity to engage in the critical tasks required to understand or prepare for the role of principal and are relegated to a support role and seen as utilitarian in the accomplishment of goals for the principal that they serve, leaving their professional development up to chance (Inabinett, 2015).

Principal preparation, licensure programs, and formalized district level leadership programs typically prepare educators for the principal position, not the assistant principal position (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). The most influential factor in the development of leadership practice for assistant principals is on the job experience (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Seashore et al., 2010). The preparation of assistant principals must be a purposeful designed activity as the performance of the traditional requirements of the assistant principal role provides inadequate experience for the eventuality of assuming the principal role (Kwan, 2008). Research indicates the more authentic experiences a principal has during their formative years, the more capacity for effective leadership he develops (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2012; Clark, Matorell, & Rockoff, 2009; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Purposefully exposing assistant principals to authentic job-embedded experiences, facilitating reflection on those experiences, and providing support throughout the process with natural consequences and outcomes are foundational parts of the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984).

The study of how assistant principals develop the necessary skills to successfully advance to the principal role can be accomplished by looking at them as adult learners through the theoretical frameworks provided by Malcolm Knowles' *Theory of Andragogy* (1970), and David Kolb's *Theory of Experiential Learning* (1984). These foundational

theories provide the framework for the identification of specific job embedded experiences that offer the greatest opportunity for professional learning.

Statement of the Problem

The complex and ever-expanding school principal job description, the burgeoning assessment and accountability measures, the attrition of experienced principals, and the perceived lack of preparation experienced by entry-year school leaders has made the recruitment, development, and retention of talented principals a critical mission for those responsible for principal preparation (Sackney & Walker, 2006). The impending retirement of nearly 40% of all currently seated principals exacerbates the problem and drives the imperative nature of principal preparation (Blackman, & Fenwick, 2000). In addition to the retirements, nearly 50% of principals choose to vacate the position in their first three years, with many of them feeling unprepared for the role of principal (Superville, 2014; Thompson, 2010). The retirements and attrition contribute to a growing crisis as there are not enough adequately prepared building leaders to replace them at the rate they are leaving.

Knowles (1980) and Kolb (1984) and the field of experiential learning is the cornerstone of all leadership development and the professional growth of assistant principals preparing for the principal position (Ciroka, 2015). Kolb (1984) stated that impactful learning opportunities must occur in the context of real-world experience.

This concept has specific applicability to the learning experiences of entry-year school leaders. The paradigm supports the assertion that when a beginning administrator is immersed in the assistant principal role and provided a series of purposefully designed job-embedded, authentic experiences under the mentorship of an experienced principal

with whom they have developed a positive relationship, they have the highest probability of acquiring, refining, and generalizing critical leadership skills.

There is little research literature available for examining the professional development of the assistant principal (Oliver, 2005). Many of the next generation of school principals are currently serving in the position of assistant principal, and principals have a responsibility to facilitate the growth and preparation of emerging school leaders.

The study examined the professional responsibilities and specific learning opportunities afforded assistant principals by a supervising principal.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to use the principles of andragogy and experiential learning to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the job-embedded experiences that contribute to the development of the skills necessary for assistant principals to advance successfully to the principalship. This study was driven by the necessity of research into the specific critical experiences that yield the highest possible level of personal and professional growth, and the highest probability of an assistant principal having the appropriate set of professional skills to succeed, drives this research study.

This study investigated the specific, pivotal job-embedded professional experiences of secondary school assistant principals that facilitated personal and professional growth in their preparation for advancement to the principal position.

Within the conceptual framework of andragogy and experiential learning theory, the research questions sought to identify, describe, and validate the specific job-

embedded professional growth experiences of the secondary public-school assistant principal.

1. When providing narrative descriptions of their entry-year, what specific educational experiences do secondary school assistant principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for advancement to the school principal position?
2. Reflecting on their own personal entry-year experiences, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?
3. Reflecting on their professional experiences working with entry-year assistant principals, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful to current entry-year assistant principals in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

Research Design

The purpose of this study led the researcher to the selection of the phenomenological qualitative research study design. Phenomenological qualitative research design incorporating the use of focus groups and surveys for data collection was chosen as the most appropriate method for the proposed research questions (Creswell, 2009, 2014).

Phenomenology is focused on an analysis of the life experiences of human beings and is used to gather data that permits the researcher to describe how individuals or

groups of individuals experience a specific phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012). The method facilitated the researcher to identify meaning behind the descriptions provided by entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals regarding a specific phenomenon, in this case, their experiences during the entry-year that they describe as impactful to their professional growth (Creswell, 2009, 2014). The protocols for the focus groups facilitated the collection of data while seeking to minimize researcher biases and assumptions related to the targeted experiences and placed an emphasis on the researcher building complex meanings from the direct observation of participants and their first hand descriptions of experiencing the entry year (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002). The phenomenological approach used in this study facilitated the analysis of a group of individuals' described experiences for the purpose of identifying the common themes featured in the description (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007).

This study employed the use of four separate focus groups to examine participant descriptions of the job-embedded experiences of entry-year secondary assistant principals. Following the focus groups, the researcher used a data analysis process that identified common themes within those descriptions and used those themes to construct a detailed composite description of the experience (Colaizza, 1978). The researcher then used a survey instrument sent to a larger sample to corroborate the themes and descriptions developed from the focus group data analysis. The detailed composite descriptions of participant experience were developed for the purpose of generalization to similar individuals or groups.

Within the conceptual framework of andragogy and experiential learning theory, the research questions sought to identify, describe, and validate the specific job-

embedded professional growth experiences of the secondary public-school assistant principal.

Significance of Study

The mid 1990s brought a significant shortage of viable candidates for school leadership positions (Thompson, 2010). The lack of qualified principals worsened with accelerated retirements and a previously unseen attrition from the principal role (Blackman & Fenwick, 2000; Superville, 2014; Thompson, 2010). The shortage of effective principals continues and drives the need for the support and development of current assistant principals and the cultivation of future principals through the design of high-quality principal preparation programs (Johnson, 2004; Olson, 2008; Walker & Dimmock, 2006; Wallin, 2006).

The development of capable principals is ultimately dependent on the development of more effective, comprehensive educational leadership development programs that embrace the concept that intensive and extensive internship programs and field experiences are integral to success (Fuller et al., 2016; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006). These critical field experiences provide assistant principals with first-hand knowledge of the complicated expectations associated with the school setting (Bartee, 2012). Research continues to reinforce the imperative that principal preparation and licensure programs re-evaluate their targets and replace curricular experiences focused on the acquisition of management strategies, with a curricular program that places an emphasis on field-based experiences and internships (Hitt, Tucker, & Young, 2012; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2011; Petzko, 2008). When principal preparation programs incorporate fieldwork and practicums that take place alongside

experienced principals, they produce stronger, more confident school leaders that have the ability to apply what they have learned in the field (Clarke & Wildy, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Fry, Bottoms, & O'Neill, 2005; Lovely, 2004; Wallace, 2013).

The true preparation for the principal position typically begins after an educator has completed a formalized principal preparation program, secured a licensure to practice, and obtained the entry-level position of assistant principal (Adams & Copland, 2007; Vogel & Weiler, 2014). The assistant principal position is traditionally a pathway to the principal position and ultimately the gateway to most school administrative positions (Armstrong, 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark & Davis, 2000; Militello et al., 2009; Winter, 2002).

There exists a widely accepted assumption that working in the assistant principal role naturally prepares individuals for the principal position, and that when an assistant principal demonstrates success as the assistant principal, it will facilitate advancement to the principal position (Daresh, 2004; Kwan, 2008; Oliver, 2003). However, the mission to develop the skills and readiness of assistant principals to take on the role of principal requires a clearly defined growth plan (Oliver, 2005). Andragogy and experiential learning theory both place a premium on the naturally occurring consequences that flow from new experiences (Kolb, 1984; Knowles, 1980). Subsequently, "The effectiveness of early career principals may be affected by the environment where they served as assistant principals" (Bastian & Henry, 2015, p. 601).

There needs to be a shift in the focus of professional development for assistant principals to a perspective that stresses mentorship and the creation of partnerships with

experienced leaders and targeted capacity building support (Bottom & Fry, 2009). Setting clear expectations and then prescribing and providing on-the-job learning experiences aligned with those expectations is a necessary step to developing great leaders (Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Principal training needs to focus on the development of situational decision-making capacity through experience and an awareness that the identity of a school leader is built over time and based upon the acquisition of situational competency (Moorosi, 2014; Sherman, 2008). Administrators, when asked to reflect on their initial experiences in their leadership role, identified that they acquired the necessary skills to be successful leaders through specific experiences and opportunities only available while on the job (Thessin & Clayton, 2013).

Seated principals responsible for the growth and supervision of assistant principals must be aware that researchers note, assistant principals, in the course of their daily assigned duties, are often an untapped resource of school building leadership; and while their leadership would benefit the school environment, the true value is in the professional growth afforded to the assistant principal as a result of the leadership activity (Gurley et al., 2015; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Sun & Shoho, 2017). The professional growth of inexperienced assistant principals calls for them to engage in a much more proactive role in building leadership activities (Sun & Shoho, 2017).

Assumptions

Qualitative research requires the acknowledgement that the researcher brings a set of preconceived perspectives and bias into the research setting and processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One of the major criticisms of phenomenological qualitative research is the lack of certainty in the research process that individuals chosen to participate in the

study of a specific phenomenon will have not only experienced the target phenomenon but have experienced the phenomenon in reasonably similar context. The relativist epistemological orientation chosen for this research study acknowledges that the experiences of research participants may represent different realities, and it becomes dependent on the researcher capturing and synthesizing the variety of described experiences into a single comprehensive composite description of the experience (Creswell, 2009, 2014; Yin, 2014). In addition, criterion referenced sampling assures that all participants will have experienced the same phenomenon being studied, and the specifically identified criteria that facilitated the sorting of potential participants into distinct participant candidate pools permits the assumption that the sample chosen is truly representative of the four identified groups of participants identified in the methodology. Additionally, the selection of an established pool of potential participants as a starting point in the sampling process, vetted by trusted state level organizations, provides the study a level of trust in the participant pool and ultimately the samples selected.

Participant honesty is a foundational assumption to the reliability in data collection and the trustworthiness of the study findings (Simon, 2011). The study required participants to be part of a focus group addressing the stated research questions and exploring the descriptions of their personal experiences. The researcher makes the assumption that participants in the focus group process are truthful in the descriptions and details of their personal experiences. While there is a professional relationship between focus group participants, there was no financial or social incentive for their participation. All participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed that confidentiality and anonymity would be respected throughout the process. The researcher provided an

overview of the study purpose, and participants engaged in the study based upon their interest to contribute to the field of educational leadership development and not for some ulterior motive.

The extensive review of literature conducted as a component of this research study exhaustively explored the foundational theories of andragogy and experiential learning and provided a historical perspective and underpinning to the development of the research questions. That literature review also provided a perspective shared by the researcher and participants regarding the current attrition within the ranks of school administrators. This shared awareness also served to reinforce the desire of participants to honestly participate in the study.

Limitations

Researchers often state that replicability is a fundamental concern with phenomenological qualitative research (Simon, 2011). Specifically, the study of how human beings describe an experience is unique and contextually anchored (Giorgi, 2012; Mohajan, 2018; Yin, 2011). This study relied upon the focus group as a data collection tool with multiple participants responding to the same question. While there is consistency in the protocol, it is dependent on the participants to share their unique perspectives on the question being asked.

While an established pool of potential candidates was used in the sampling process, there may be difficulty in generalizing the findings beyond the borders of the initial pool of participants (Simon, 2011). The sample may not be considered random and introduces the motives of the participants who chose to respond. In addition, there is a tremendous amount of variance when we look at the unique attributes of each region,

district, school, staff, and relationships that the participants' experience is based in. There are over 600 school districts in the State of Ohio, and therefore, the potential for over 600 different contexts within which participant experience occurs (ODE, 2018). In addition to the variance in context, the nature of crisis and periods of socio-political upheaval in their individual workplace setting may influence participant experience (Mohajan, 2018).

The researcher drew a sample of 20 study participants from the identified participant pools for the focus groups. There is a question if the sample was large enough to draw enough usable data or offer the ability to generalize the findings to a larger population.

The nature of phenomenological research relies upon the participants describing their individual experiences with the targeted phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012). There must be an admission on the part of the researcher that the descriptions of the participants' experiences represent a moment in time, filtered through current context (Mohajan, 2018). That context could relate to the time of year, fatigue level of participants, employment situation, or their current emotional perspective of their job.

Delimitations

The actual target population chosen for this study represents a very specific subgroup within the field of educational leadership, specifically, entry-year secondary school assistant principals. The criteria and attributes of the participant candidates in each focus group pool provides a purposefully narrow scope and context to the phenomenon being studied. The purpose statement highlights the primary goal of the study and frames the data that it intends to collect.

Descriptive research protocols and focus group question scripts were developed. The comprehensive literature review and a theoretical framework that is accepted as a foundational paradigm for the professional development of educators assisted the researcher in the design of specific research questions (Kolb, 1984).

The research questions are directed at identifying the critical job-embedded learning experiences of entry-year assistant principals. While, according to andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), the professional growth and learning of adults continue to occur throughout life, the researcher is attempting to identify and describe the specific experiences from only the entry year.

The number of participants in each of the four focus groups was purposely chosen to give the researcher ample data without generating a body of data that was unmanageable. The data were then analyzed and the generalizability of the findings addressed by the use of a researcher designed survey instrument. As a means of corroborating the focus group findings, the descriptions developed by the researcher from the focus group data will be presented to the entire pool of potential participants, triangulating focus group results with a much larger sample (Yardley, 2009; Yin, 2014). This process reinforces the trustworthiness of the conclusions.

The research methodology comprehensively outlined in chapter III defines the specific boundaries of the study and facilitates the work of future researchers (Yin, 2014). The operational definitions for concepts or individuals incorporated in this research study are listed in this chapter.

Operational Definitions

Advancement-Advancement is defined as moving from the assistant principal position to a principal position. The assistant principal position is traditionally a pathway to the principal position and ultimately the gateway to most school administrative positions (Armstrong, 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark, & Davis, 2000; Militello et al., 2009; Winter, 2002).

Andragogy-Andragogy is defined by researcher Malcolm Knowles as the “Art and science of adult learning” (Knowles, 1970, p. 55). He stated that the process of learning is different for adults as compared to the way that children learn. Adults are self-directed learners and must be actively involved in the experiences associated with learning. Adults are ultimately responsible for the outcomes of the learning experiences that they participate in (Knowles, 1980). Today, the term Andragogy has become synonymous with any form of adult learning (Kearsley, 2010).

Attrition-Research indicates that the current climate in the field of education, the lack of adequate preparation for the job, and the expanding job descriptions are forcing a growing number of school leaders to retire, return to the teaching role, or exit the field of education completely (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Ross, & Chung, 2006; Olson, 2008; Thompson, 2010). This attrition will be defined by an exit from administration, either to another role in education, or an exit from the field altogether.

Entry-year assistant principal-Entry-year assistant principals were selected from a pool of entry-year assistant principals identified and vetted by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), The Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA), and the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA). An

entry-year assistant principal is an assistant principal serving in an Ohio public school district, in the first year in school administration. An additional requirement for inclusion into this study noted that the entry-year assistant principal was not employed by their current school district in the year prior to their entry into the assistant principal role (ODE, 2018; OAESA, 2018; OASSA, 2018).

Experienced principal-Experienced principals were selected from a pool of experienced public school building principals identified and vetted by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), The Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA), and the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA). Experienced principals were employed in the principal position for at least five years and received an endorsement from their superintendent identifying them as successful and capable of mentoring entry-year administrators for the 2018 Beginning Administrator Mentorship Academy.

Experiential learning-A contemporary of Malcolm Knowles, researcher David Kolb, studied experiential learning. Kolb (1984) stated that “learning is a process where knowledge is created by the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Experiential learning continues to be foundational theory in the study of adult learning and in the study of professional development for educators (Kolb, 1984). The concept that experience is a required part of learning any new skill led Kolb to the phrase learning by doing (Kolb, 1984).

School district typology-Public school districts in the State of Ohio are identified by the Ohio Department of Education as either urban, suburban, rural, or small town (ODE, 2013). Additional identifiers are also available for the purposes of data analysis.

Some of those identifiers, including the Appalachian designation, referring to Ohio counties in the area defined as Appalachia are regional (ODE, 2018c). For the purpose of this study, school districts will be identified as belonging to one of two groups, either: 1) urban and suburban, or 2) rural and Appalachian.

Secondary schools-The Ohio Department of Education provides distinct grade bands in the issuance of principal licensure. The licensure band for schools serving grade levels 5-12, traditionally known as secondary schools, will be used as the operational definition of the secondary school setting for the principals and assistant principals selected for this study. Those schools may include, intermediate schools, middle schools, junior high schools, high schools, joint vocational schools, career-technical schools, or any combination of the aforementioned list (ODE, 2019).

Summary

The researcher proposed that there is a difference between a school leader being certified to hold the principal position and a school leader being qualified to hold the principal position. While all individuals who complete the required steps to secure principal licensure are technically certified to be employed in the principal position, it is a fundamental belief of the researcher that it is the authentic, job-embedded learning opportunities that an entry-level school leader experiences that dictate true professional development and growth.

The descriptions generated by an analysis of the data gathered for this study provide a roadmap to the job-embedded experiences of assistant principals that facilitate the professional growth necessary to advance competently to the principal position. This is critical data for those responsible for the design and delivery of the curriculum set in

university-based principal licensure programs. It is the opinion of the researcher that the findings of this research study also hold specific and immediate value for current secondary school principals as they provide mentorship and supervision to their assistant principals.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The strength of the school principal is second only to the effectiveness of the classroom teacher when examining the factors that directly affect the success of students (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). The nature of education today, with a myriad of accountability measures, burgeoning societal pressures, shoestring budgets, exhausting work hours and scrutiny of public employee salaries, has made the recruitment, development, and retention of talented principals an imperative mission for those responsible for principal preparation. Confounding the process of preparing and retaining qualified principals is the impending retirement of nearly 40% of all currently seated principals (Blackman & Fenwick, 2000). In addition to the retirements, there are a significant number of principals choosing to vacate the position based upon feeling unprepared for the role of principal (Thompson, 2010). The attrition has contributed to a growing crisis as there are not enough adequately prepared building leaders to replace them at the rate they are leaving. The looming shortage of effective principals raises the stakes on developing new school leaders. Many members of the next generation of principals are employed in the position of assistant principal, and principals have a responsibility to facilitate the growth and preparation of emerging school leaders.

The study examined the professional responsibilities and specific learning opportunities afforded assistant principals by a supervising principal. The purpose was to use the principles of andragogy and experiential learning to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the job-embedded experiences that contribute to the development of the skills necessary for assistant principals to successfully move forward

to the principalship. The necessity of research into the specific critical experiences that yield the highest possible level of personal and professional growth, and subsequently, the highest probability of an assistant principal acquiring a principal position, and then having the appropriate set of professional skills to succeed drives this research study.

Theoretical Framework

The study of how assistant principals acquire the skills necessary to advance to the principal role and succeed requires an understanding of the learning processes that are at work when examining adult professionals. There is a need to examine the professional growth of assistant principals by looking at them as adult learners through the theoretical frameworks provided by Malcolm Knowles' *Theory of Andragogy* (1970), and David Kolb's *Theory of Experiential Learning* (1984). These foundational theories will provide the framework for the identification of specific job embedded experiences that offer the greatest opportunity for professional learning.

Andragogy

Malcolm Knowles (1970) defined Andragogy as the “art and science of adult learning” (p. 55) stating that the process of learning is different for adults than it is for children. Adults are self-directed learners, involved as active participants in, and ultimately responsible for, the learning outcomes of the experiences that they undertake (Knowles, 1980). In the time since Knowles published, the term Andragogy has become accepted to mean any form of adult learning (Kearsley, 2010).

Understanding Andragogy, and subsequently any form of adult learning, as defined by Knowles, requires an understanding of four assumptions about adult learners,

six characteristics of adult learners, and finally, four principles as applied to adult learning (Knowles, 1984).

The four assumptions relate to the maturational state of learning moving from child-centered learner to adult learner. The first assumption regarding adult learners is that, as an individual ages and matures, one moves from a condition of dependence to a condition defined by self-direction (Knowles, 1970). When schooling begins for a child, the responsibility for ensuring that learning takes place is firmly attached to the teacher. As the student matures, more and more responsibility for that learning shifts to the student, requiring a sense of self-direction on the part of the student if learning goals are to be met. The second assumption states that as a person matures, they compile a collection of life experiences that ultimately become a resource for future learning (Knowles, 1970). Future learning is enhanced when a learner has accumulated a larger and wider range of experiences. The concept of trial and error is at the heart of this assumption. A learner is able to improve subsequent outcomes based upon the number of trials in his experience. The third assumption regarding adult learners is that as persons age and mature, they become more adept at the ability to develop skills associated with their social and work role (Knowles, 1970). When an adult chooses a particular arena for a work role or social endeavor, the desire to be successful in his chosen area enhances his ability to learn the skills required for success in that role. An adult participating in a learning task required for his field of employment has a direct and vested interest in being successful in the learning activity resulting in sustained employment or advancement. The fourth assumption asserts that as a person ages and matures, his perspective on learning changes from one involving delayed application of new skills to a perspective

that stresses the need for immediate and impactful use of newly acquired skills and knowledge (Knowles, 1970). Child learners often learn skills that will be required later in life, like geometry or balancing a checkbook. Adult learners who purposefully engage in learning tasks, do so because there is an immediate need for the skills resulting from success in the learning experience. Professional development experiences are provided to adult learners in the workplace with the intent of directly impacting current performance of work-related tasks.

Using those four assumptions regarding adult learners as a starting point leads to Knowles' six characteristics of adult learners in an attempt to describe the specific characteristics of adults involved in the learning process.

The first characteristic of adult learning is that adult learners are self-directed, and that self-direction requires active involvement, decision making, and goal setting. The guidance of a mentor can be an important part in this process. Characteristic number one highlights the need for learners, or in the case of this study, assistant principal's need to be self-directed (Knowles & Associates, 1984). Assistant principals are the epitome of self-directed. Research by Norton and Kriekard (1987) identified one hundred and forty different responsibilities required of assistant principals. With so much to be responsible for, assistant principals absolutely must demonstrate the ability to be autonomous and proactive in assuming responsibility for their work (Knowles & Associates, 1984).

The second characteristic states that adult learners utilize existing knowledge and previous experiences, actively connecting current activities and learning opportunities with previous experiences and outcomes (Knowles, 1984). Characteristic number two has specific applicability to the learning process for assistant principals. Adult learners

must make connections from their past experiences and the knowledge gained to their current experiences and current tasks (Knowles 1984). Past experience and knowledge must be used when facing new tasks that require learning new skills. Assistant principals have classroom experience in both the school setting as teachers, and in their own post-graduate academic preparation as a student. All of these experiences come into play and become the reservoir of learned knowledge from which new skills and talents arise.

The third characteristic is that adult learning is goal oriented, with clearly identified intended outcomes (Knowles & Associates, 1984). The characteristic states that the motivation of an adult learner is elevated when the learning occurs embedded in a real life, or authentic, immersive experience. Characteristic number three mandates that adult learners work from a goal-driven perspective, that motivation to learn new skills is enhanced by the learners' awareness that the achievement of the goal fulfills a professional responsibility (Knowles & Associates, 1984). Adult learners must work proactively to align the tasks that they attempt to complete with their intended outcomes. The immersion in workplace responsibilities also inherently ties a timeline to the completion of the activities. The time-bound aspect of the experience is crucial according to Knowles (Knowles & Associates, 1984).

The fourth characteristic of adult learning identifies that learning experiences are held to higher value by a learner when assigned tasks are perceived to be relevant to existing personal goals (Knowles & Associates, 1984). Characteristic number four requires that adult learners interpret the current tasks that require learning new skills as relevant to their goals (Knowles & Associates, 1984). When those new tasks are a specific job responsibility, there is an urgency and relevance to succeed.

The fifth characteristic of adult learning is that learning experiences involving theoretical concepts are more easily acquired by adult learners when the concepts are applied in real life situations (Knowles & Associates, 1984). There must be a practical application of abstract ideas. Characteristic number five, while the shortest in Knowles (1984) writing, carries the most weight in terms of our viewing assistant principal growth through the lens of andragogy. Knowles (1984) stated that learners must discover the practicality of theoretical knowledge and must apply theoretical concepts learned in the classroom to real life experiences. To learn new skills, assistant principals must apply theoretical concepts learned in the university setting when immersed in daily administrative task completion.

Finally, the sixth characteristic of adult learning is that learning experiences yield the most positive outcomes in terms of skill acquisition, when the experiences require social interaction and collaboration with other individuals (Knowles & Associates, 1984). If principals responsible for mentoring assistants communicate through words and practice, that adult learners are colleagues and partners instead of occupying a subordinate role in the process, adult learning is enhanced (Knowles & Associates, 1984). Adult learning cannot happen in a vacuum as the inherent collaboration and human interaction that often complicate completing tasks is necessary for productive learning experiences (Knowles & Associates, 1984).

Knowles (1984) completed the foundation of adult learning theory with what is described as the four principles of andragogy. These four principles simplified a number of the assertions of andragogy and provide a basis for examining adult learning in a variety of settings. Principle number one states that adults must be responsible for the

planning, delivery, and assessment of their own growth experiences (Knowles & Associates, 1984). When looking at this principle in regard to designing higher education and principal preparation programs, there are some challenges. Applying this principle to the adult learning available in the professional setting, specifically skill acquisition and professional development of entry-level school leaders, the application of the principles of andragogy provide fertile ground. Principle two asserts that learning activities are completely embedded in experience (Knowles & Associates, 1984). The principle also stresses that an adult learner's failure to meet stated goals for a learning activity is sometimes even more valuable than successes. The third principle states that adult learners place a higher value on learning opportunities and subsequent outcomes when there is immediate and direct personal or professional impact for them as a result of their performance on the learning task (Knowles & Associates, 1984). The fourth principle reminds us that adult learning revolves around problem solving, not content delivery (Knowles & Associates, 1984).

There is a need to identify specific, critical, job-embedded learning experiences that assistant principals encounter in the school setting that play a part in their professional and personal development. Knowles theory of Andragogy (1980) and his assumptions (1980), characteristics (1984), and principles (1984) of adult learners provide a tangible framework to study the variables and influences in the professional development of assistant principals.

Experiential Learning

The field of Experiential Learning, championed by the researcher David Kolb, a contemporary of Malcolm Knowles in the mid 1980s, continues to be a foundational

component in the professional development of educators. Kolb (1984) stated “Learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Kolb’s research is an extension of research conducted by John Dewey, who in 1915, described a concept whereby experience is a required part of learning any new skill, and it is from this work that Kolb simplified and popularized the concept of learning by doing (Dewey, 1915; Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) stated that true “knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). Using Experiential Learning as the framework facilitates a shift, where the focus is on the process of learning experiences, not on the product of learning experiences (UC Davis, 2011).

Kolb (1984) proposed a model wherein learner experience is followed by a process of reflection. The reflection that follows an experience leads a learner to develop personal conclusions about the experience, and it is through these drawn conclusions that a learner is able to competently and actively experiment within subsequent experiences to improve subsequent outcomes (Kolb, 1984). Through this process, or cycle, as Kolb calls it, learners are able to generalize and improve upon the application of learned material within a range of new experiences (Kolb, 1984). Tangible experiences are a critical component in adult learning as they facilitate not only the acquisition of new skills; they also provide a frame of reference for adult learners to make newly learned skills generalizable and permanent (Kolb, 1984).

The Association for Experiential Education (2018) has compiled the notes of researchers studying the work of Kolb and Knowles and have identified several fundamental principles to consider when looking at professional growth through the process of experiential learning.

The first fundamental principle is that experiential learning occurs when learners are exposed to, or assigned to, purposefully chosen experiences, which in turn are supported with opportunities to engage in Kolb's reflection cycle (Kolb, 1984). The key to effective process continues to be experience followed by reflection (Kolb, 1984).

The second fundamental principle of experiential learning states that the participants engaged in learning experiences need to be aware that they are ultimately responsible for the outcomes of each experience (Kolb, 1984). This principle has particular applicability when looking at experiential learning of professionals in the workplace. The high stakes nature of a learner acquiring the skills to be effective in a chosen field or position directly relates to livelihood and advancement.

The third fundamental principle of experiential learning states that experiential learning activities require active, purposeful participation by the learner (Kolb, 1984). One of the fundamental differences between child and adult learners is the active involvement and autonomy of adult learners (Knowles, 1970; Kolb, 1984). This purposeful involvement and investment are imperative.

The fourth fundamental principle of experiential learning requires that activities must be authentic, embedded in functional activities, and without predicted or predetermined outcomes (Kolb, 1984). Learning new skills and growing in professional capacity while immersed in the workplace as opposed to engaging in learning activities that are synthetic, content driven tasks, provides more effective adult learning (Kolb, 1984).

The fifth fundamental principle identifies that an instructor plays a critical role in the process of experiential learning by selecting the specific experiences, supporting

learners, encouraging the learner to take advantage of subsequent, unplanned, spontaneous opportunities, and then facilitating reflection (Kolb, 1984). The design of the experiential learning activity maximizes the use of real world, natural consequences and successes (Kolb, 1984).

The use of Experiential Learning as foundational theory for the purpose of the theoretical framework has specific applications to the professional growth and learning of assistant principals developing the skills necessary for success in the principal position. Researchers continue to point out that Knowles and Kolb and the field of experiential learning are the cornerstone of all leadership development and should be studied well beyond the formal post-graduate education setting (Ciroka, 2015).

Learning and professional development are accelerated and most impactful when they occur in the context of real-world experience (Kolb, 1984). An application of the fundamental experiential learning principles has long been accepted as a valid aspect of teacher preparation programming (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Goddard et al., 2010; Grossman, Ronfelt, & Cohen, 2012; Ronfelt, 2015). When we look at the preparation of teachers by the college and university licensure programs, the requirements to become a teacher are steeped in the foundations of experiential learning theory (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Rivkin, Hanichek, & Kain, 2005). Every individual who seeks to complete teacher training participates in a field placement and at least one experience in the role of student-teacher (Goddard et al., 2007; Goddard et al., 2010; Ronfelt, 2015; Grossman et al., 2012). These required field experiences and student teaching placements are designed to expose the adult learner, in this case, candidates for teacher licensure, to specific experiential learning opportunities (Jackson & Bruegmann,

2009). From those field experiences, Kolb (1984) asserted that reflection occurs and subsequently successive knowledge is created, which is then reapplied, reflected upon again, and the resulting knowledge is generalized, leading to incrementally improved outcomes.

Student teaching is the capstone, or most influential and intensive experience of teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007). Kuh (2008) described the professional internship of student-teaching as a “high-impact experience” designed to “challenge learners to develop new ways of thinking” in context (p. 28). Student teaching contains purposefully designed experiences that allow the participant to actively engage in authentic tasks and be responsible for the outcomes (McKim, Latham, Treptow, & Rayfield, 2013). The work of the cooperating teacher in not only facilitating the day-to-day assignment of new experiences, but in the facilitation of learner reflection on the knowledge gained by the success or failure on each new task, is the most important factor contributing to the success of the student teaching experience (Kitchell & Torres, 2007).

In the field of teacher preparation, individual candidates who, immersed in a field placement setting, encounter a series of purposefully designed, job-embedded, real-life, experiences under the mentorship of a supervising professional with whom they have developed a positive relationship, have the highest probability of acquiring critical professional skills and becoming successful teachers (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Rivkin et al., 2005). When examining these steps and requirements, it is easy to observe the fundamental principles of experiential learning described by Knowles (1980, 1984) and Kolb (1984).

If these tenets are embraced by the professional establishment for teacher preparation programs, logically, the same application of a model of experiential learning should hold true for the training and development of school leaders. Experiential learning theory supports the paradigm that, when a beginning administrator is immersed in the assistant principal role, provided a series of purposefully designed authentic experiences embedded within their real-life, day-to-day function, under the mentorship of an experienced principal with whom they have developed a positive relationship, they should also have the highest probability of acquiring and refining new knowledge, developing and generalizing critical skills, and becoming successful leaders.

Current Literature on Principalship

The review of literature yielded a number of categories identified in prior research. This review of literature is divided up into the following sub-sections: 1) the role of the school principal, 2) educational leadership standards, best practices, and state licensure requirements, 3) principal preparation programs, 4) the impact of the building principal on student outcomes, 5) a shortage of candidates, 6) the role of the assistant principal, 7) the relationship of the principal and assistant principal, 8) the role of succession programs, 9) the role of mentorship, 10) learning through critical experiences.

The Role of the School Principal

The position of the principal in American schools was born from pragmatic needs. The mid-18th century provided the setting when one room school houses, with a single teacher responsible for all aspects of education, were forced to grow with the local population (Rousmaniere, 2007). This facilitated the need for additional classrooms and additional teachers in a school building and required that an individual be appointed by

the community as the “principal teacher” (Kafka, 2009). The selection of these new school leaders posed a challenge for schools as there were no formal training programs specifically for school leaders (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007). The principal was selected from the teaching staff, and the job often fell to the teacher who had been there the longest (Rousmaniere, 2007). These principal teachers were viewed by the community as the most important, consequential, or influential teacher in the building (Rousmaniere, 2007). These early school leaders taught class in addition to accepting the responsibility for a wide range of managerial tasks including the assignment of teaching duties, student discipline, maintenance of the school building, attendance of teachers and students, and ringing school bells (Brown, 2005; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007). The principal position continued to evolve as the size of schools and school districts grew, eventually reaching a point where the teaching responsibilities of the principal teacher were dropped, and the role of the full time principal was established with an expanded list of responsibilities, and an expansion of authority and prestige (Brown, 2005; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007).

By the mid-20th century, the view of the principal position had shifted from being the sole manager of a school to one also accountable for instructional leadership as well (Kafka, 2009). In the decades since, while still often defined as the manager and instructional leader, the role of the 21st century principal has geometrically expanded (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007). Nutov and Somech (2017), in an attempt to provide a definition of the principal role, described a job “encompassing the entirety of the people and activities at the school and in the life of the community that the school serves” (p. 192).

As the functional role of the principal developed, research conducted by the Wallace Foundation (2013) discovered a clustering of principal responsibilities into five key areas of practice: developing and communicating a vision for the success for all students, establishing and maintaining a climate conducive to teaching and learning, fostering the ability of others to lead, actively improving curriculum and instructional practice, and the managing staff, student data, and building level process and procedure. However, the attempts by researchers to define, in any concrete way, the specific daily tasks of the school principal has been incomplete in that the observational and survey-based tools used to gather data have primarily incorporated large numbers of subjects and short periods of time, neglecting the reality in the field that unpredictability and a seasonal fluctuation of duties defines the role (Camburn et al., 2010; Goldring et al., 2008; Grissom et al., 2013; Sebastian et al., 2018; Spillane & Hunt, 2010). In addition, the specific context in terms of the type of schools studied, grade levels involved, the diversity and socio-economics of the school community, also directly impact the variety of duties that may be assigned to a principal (Goldring et al., 2008.)

The function of school principals includes not only the wide range of daily duties, but also includes conflicting commitments to the multiple constituents that a principal interacts with in the varied roles that those duties require (Camburn et al., 2010; Grissom et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2015; May et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2007). The conflicts borne from a principal's attempt to meet the day-to-day demands originating within the school building and those originating externally from superiors, state and federal regulations are becoming more frequent and high stakes (Knapp & Feldman, 2012). The job of the school principal has grown more and more complex, and that complexity is

compounded by the changes in the policy environment related to public school reform and accountability initiatives (Grissom et al., 2015).

An examination of literature recently published regarding the complexities of the school principal position is almost exclusively driven by research into the principal as an instructional leader (Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2013; Sebastian et al., 2018). The focus on the building principal as the instructional leader has overshadowed the role of the principal as an organizational manager; however, Grissom and Loeb (2011) identified that principals who have developed the skill to meet their responsibility for instructional leadership while also meeting the expectations for their complex list of management responsibilities, demonstrate the highest levels of success in the principal position. In fact, principals must not only serve the organization by acting in an instructional leadership role but by attending to human resource management, school finance management, and facilities management (Grison et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2013; Sebastian et al., 2018). The expansion of the role and the shifting focus to a high-stakes role of instructional leadership does not lessen the critical nature of a principal having the ability to successfully navigate organizational tasks like budgeting and facilities management (Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

The number one priority of principals continues to be to align all aspects of schooling to result in success for all students (Leithwood et al., 2004; Peterson, 2002). As the list of specific responsibilities for the principal grew, the development of categories or domains appeared to be the most descriptive way to encapsulate the role regardless of the individual setting.

Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) identified seven critical functions that a principal must develop the ability to perform in order to be effective:

- An effective leader demonstrates instructional leadership. They must be accountable for high quality instruction, supervision of curriculum, ensure the adequacy of teaching resources, and they must model effective teaching practice.
- An effective leader demonstrates cultural leadership, maintaining and communicating the traditions and history of the school.
- An effective leader demonstrates managerial leadership, successfully managing budgets, schedules, facilities, safety, security, and transportation.
- An effective leader is a human resources leader, recruiting, hiring, mentoring, and developing the professional capacity of not only teachers and staff, but fellow leaders as well.
- An effective leader is a strategic leader, responsible for the communication of a mission and vision and is responsible for accessing the means to achieve them.
- An effective leader demonstrates an ability to represent and advocate for the school in the community, conducting appropriate public relations, and developing support while buffering the school against outside interests.
- An effective leader demonstrates what the authors refer to as micro-political leadership, maximizing organizational resources while mediating internal conflicts and interests. (p. 18)

These seven critical functions illustrate the responsibilities of a school principal and serve to highlight the wide variety of duties that require strengths as an instructional leader, facilities manager, financial analyst, visionary, counselor, and public relations specialist (Portin et al., 2003).

A review of current literature provides a picture of the school principal as working in a role defined by long hours and a fragmented day filled with a variety of brief, unrelated tasks (Sebastian et al., 2018). A school principal works on average over 50 hours per week and may be required to participate in over one hundred different activities per day (Sebastian et al., 2018). The more the role of the principal is studied, the more expansive the definition becomes, leading to the idea that, while there is no specific way to lead a school, there is also no specific description of the responsibilities of the principal (Portin et al., 2003).

Principal Preparation

As principals gained authority within their communities, there was a purposeful attempt to legitimize the principal role through the establishment of professional organizations and subsequent lobbying for the creation of laws that required specialized training and academic qualifications to become a principal (Kafka, 2009). Legislative bodies at the state level passed laws that established requirements for specialized education at the university level and a set of specific prerequisites for individuals to hold the position of principal (Brown, 2005; Kafka 2009). Principal preparation programs had grown from informal local structures designed to facilitate succession from the teaching ranks within a school building, to university-based educational leadership programs and state endorsed requirements resulting in licensure to hold the principal position (Kafka,

2009). Levine (2005) stressed the importance that those responsible for principal preparation program development recognize that true preparation is a continuum of experiences, not an isolated, packaged program with a defined beginning and end.

Standards and Best Practices

As the job responsibilities of the school principal have changed, the standards upon which their performance is guided and judged have changed as well. By the end of the 1980s, many organizations involved in preparing school leaders attempted to identify and define the variables that went into effective leadership (Abu-Hussain, 2014). The Interstate Leadership and Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Policy Standards stand out as one of the first commonly adopted set of standards developed to guide school leadership development.

In 1994, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSO), began the ISLLC initiative with the input from 24 different U.S. states, generous grant funding, and the endorsement of a number of national associations including the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, American Association of School Administrators, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Association of Teacher Educators, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, National Policy Board of Educational Administration, National School Boards Association, and University Council for Educational Administration. The members of the consortium asserted that the standards that they were developing were “a central pillar in the struggle to forge a vision

of educational leadership for tomorrow's schools" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996 p. 6).

The consortium believed that the first step to developing standards for school leadership was the development of a list of principles meant to provide guidance for the standards development work (Council, 1996 p. 7).

1. Any standard for effective school leadership should make student learning the primary priority. This focus would serve to keep the student as the central focus for any refining or restructuring of leadership development programming.
2. All participants involved in the consortium must understand the role of the school principal is changing. Accepting this change should lead those involved to the conclusion that the standards that guide a principal's development and mission must change along with it.
3. Future school leadership, as compared to the autocratic system of school leadership that had once defined the school structure, has to give way to standards that not only acknowledged the collaborative nature of leadership that is required today, but stressed the acquisition of the skills that fostered it.
4. All participants involved in the consortium agreed that any standards developed for school leaders should be purposefully set high as to act in a way that demanded an upgrade in the profession of school leadership.
5. Any standards developed must be used as a foundational piece of a performance-based evaluation system for school leaders.
6. The standards that are to be developed must be integrated with current leadership theory and written in a coherent, readily understood language.
7. The Standards developed for school leaders must be based upon the values of access, empowerment, and opportunity for all stakeholders involved in a school community. (Council, 1996 p. 7)

From these guiding principles, the Consortium set about developing a list of standards for school leaders. In the simplest term, it was a list of what effective school leaders should know and what they should do. The consensus-built document provided guidance for those responsible for the development of future educational leaders.

The six ISLLC Standards, finished and published in 1996, garnered broad acceptance and support and were immediately identified as a nationally accepted set of standards for school leaders, primarily due to the representation of national and state level stakeholders involved in the consortium (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

Standard 1: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996 p. 10).

Standard 2: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996 p. 12).

Standard 3: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources, for a safe, effective learning environment (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996 p. 14).

Standard 4: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996 p. 16).

Standard 5: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and ethics (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996 p. 18).

Standard 6: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996 p.20).

In 2006, at the request of constituents in the field, the leadership of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) Steering Committee, using the same broad representation of stakeholder associations, began an update of the ISLLC Standards. In 2008 the NPBEA published the updated version of standards for educational leadership (ISLLC, 2008). The updated version of the standards was in response to the changes that had occurred in the field in the decade since the original ISLLC standards were developed. The *Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008* adhered to the basic foundational principles used for the development of the 1996 standards yet attempted to align them to current educational policy. When work began on the original ISLLC Standards in 1994, there was very little research available to inform the development of the standards. The ISLLC 2008 revision attempted to take advantage of two specific resources. First, the preceding decade had provided valuable research into the best policies and practices associated with raising student achievement (ISLLC, 2008). The NPBEA (2008) reported that it used over 100 research studies as foundational data used in the revisions. Second, the writing of the updated standards sought input from leading practitioner-based stakeholders and representatives from higher education, specifically, stakeholders responsible for the training of future educational leaders (ISLLC, 2008). The new standards were developed, in the eyes of the NPBEA, for “new purposes and new audiences” (Council of Chief State School

Officers, 2008 p. 3). Specifically, the NPBEA saw the updated standards as tools to inform higher education licensure programs and state level licensure requirements (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008).

The six *Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008*, published as an updated version of the 1996 ISLLC Standards were specifically purposed to inform state level policy makers and were presented publicly as such, with the secondary intent of developing the use of common language in policy when discussing the development of educational leaders across the United States (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). While a number of the changes manifested in the revision are simply semantic, the NPBEA recognized the way that the semantic changes altered the intent and audience of the standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). The shift in focus to a research-based foundation and a practitioner-based implementation was intended to bolster the improvement of educational leadership preparation programs and providing focus to state licensure standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). The concept that clarity in what effective leaders do in their role as an educational leader was paramount to gaining insight into the ways that they become effective leaders.

In 2014, the NPBEA gathered to examine the ISLLC Standards 2008 and again, began a process of update and revision. The NPBEA stated in 2006 that the original ISLLC Standards required revision based upon the growing field of research into educational leadership at the time and a need for a focus on the current roles and responsibilities of school leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). The process undertaken in 2014 acknowledged the same points, that the body of research into educational leadership and the effect of school leadership on student achievement had

grown since 2008, and, in addition, the NPBEA used stakeholder focus groups and surveys to identify what practitioners saw as gaps in the standards as they related to the ever-changing day-to-day work of educational leaders (NPBEA, 2014). The NPBEA also identified the goal of expanding the definition of educational leader so the revised standards could be used as a tool for all levels of educational leadership, from entry-level assistant principals, principals, and district level leaders (NPBEA, 2014).

In 2015, the NPBEA published the 10 *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (PSEL 2015). The NPBEA sought to develop a set of standards that were stronger and directed at student learning. The connection of effective leadership to student achievement was at the heart of the standards (PSEL 2105). As with the ISLLC Standards 2008, PSEL 2015 were initially written to inform policy makers, practitioners, and those responsible for the preparation of educational leaders regarding the values necessary to effectively perform the responsibilities of an educational leader in the 21st century. The ever-changing nature of an educational leader's responsibilities are acknowledged in this document, as the PSEL 2015 did not dictate specific behaviors, instead stressing the idea that a set of standards must provide guidance that effective educational leaders can use, and apply to particular situational circumstances (PSEL, 2105). Similar to the ISLLC Standards 2008, the NPBEA initially sought to create a set of standards in PSEL 2015 that could be used by states to inform specific licensure requirements and be used by leadership preparation programs in their programming design. As part of the update and revision process that produced PSEL, the NPBEA then established a parallel team to revise the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards and draft a new set of standards specifically purposed to provide

guidance regarding the design of educational leader preparation programs, accreditation review, and procedural steps for individual state program review. The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, published in 2015, are viewed as a partner document, and are aligned with PSEL 2015. Where the PSEL applied primarily to the practitioner, NELP applied to those responsible for the design and delivery of higher education programming directed at educational leader preparation (NELP, 2015).

The 10 PSEL released in 2015 are anchored in the values and leadership qualities that both recent research and feedback from the field have identified as critical.

Standard 1: Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and the core values of high quality education and academic success and well-being of each student (PSEL, 2105, p. 9).

Standard 2: Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p. 10).

Standard 3: Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p.11).

Standard 4: Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p. 12).

Standard 5: Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the success and well-being of each student (PSEL, 2105, p. 13).

Standard 6: Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p. 14).

Standard 7: Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p. 15).

Standard 8: Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p. 16).

Standard 9: Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p. 17).

Standard 10: Effective Educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being (PSEL, 2105, p. 18).

Reflecting on the process of revisions to the ISLLC standards, the NPBEA also made a purposeful statement to the fact that PSEL 2015 are not by any means a static document. The NPBEA designed the PSEL 2015 to be reviewed and revised regularly as the field of educational leadership changes.

The ISLLC Standards update of 2008 and the revision of the ISLLC Standards into the PSEL Standards in 2015 became the foundational documents and principles used in the development of state-level professional educator standards, licensure and induction models (PSEL, 2105).

In 2004, the State of Ohio, through legislation, established the Ohio Educator Standards Board (OSB). The following year, in 2005, the OSB released the Ohio Principal Standards (OPS, 2005). The OPS 2005 were a set of professional standards for Ohio school principals. Those standards were written to provide focus to the development of goals and objectives for principals as they engaged in their professional responsibilities (OPS, 2005). The OSB indicated that the standards were to act as a guiding document for professional development, a tool to be used in the mentoring process, and most importantly, a support for higher education as program requirements are designed to educate future Ohio principals (OPS, 2005).

In 2016, The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) partnered with the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA) and the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA) and established an Ohio Principal Standards review committee, made up of representatives from all three organizations, with the purpose of reviewing, updating, and revising the 2005 Ohio Principal Standards. The committee noted that the responsibilities of the school principal have changed tremendously since the adoption of the original 2005 standards, and that the primary shortcoming of the OPS 2005 was the fact that the document was out of touch with the roles and responsibilities of current principals (OPS, 2018). The committee also took note of the revision and evolution of the ISLLC standards from 1996 through the recent release of the PSEL document in 2015. The PSEL document provided a renewed focus and, as intended by NPBEA, informed the state level process on the importance of the principal as practitioner (OPS, 2018). The Ohio Department of Education noted that the role of the school principal far exceeds the once accepted view of the principal as

manager and has shifted to the view that the principal is an instructional leader responsible for the school community as a whole, and is charged with the quasi-political responsibility of being a student and educator advocate (OPS, 2018).

The committee gathered information from a wide variety of stakeholder groups and in 2018, the Ohio Department of Education released the updated Ohio Standards for Principals (OPS, 2018). The result was a set of 10 standards for educational leaders in the State of Ohio. The 10 standards are divided into four domains, each of which, address a domain of leadership responsibilities.

Domain 1 is identified as the Leadership Domain (OPS, 2018, p. 7). Within the Leadership Domain are Standard 1: The effective educational leader develops, advocates and enacts a shared mission, vision, and core values (OPS, 2018, p. 7); Standard 2: The effective educational leader acts ethically and according to professional norms (OPS, 2018, p. 7); and Standard 3: The effective educational leader implements collaborative structures and shared leadership to analyze data and causality, align evidence based strategies to deliberate goals, develop the capacity of staff, and partner with internal and external supports to improve teaching and learning conditions and outcomes (OPS, 2018, p. 7).

Domain 2 is identified as the Learning Domain (OPS, 2018, p. 10). Within the Learning Domain are Standard 4: The effective educational leader fosters an environment of effective and rigorous personalized instruction by ensuring each student has equitable access to effective teachers, leaders, and learning environments (OPS, 2018, p. 10); and Standard 5: The effective educational leader supports all staff by promoting and

organizing an environment focused on continuous improvement and personal growth in order to achieve positive outcomes for each student (OPS, 2018, p. 10).

Domain 3 is identified as the Culture Domain (OPS, 2018, p. 12). Within the Cultural Domain are Standard 6: The effective educational leader models, supports and cultivates a school culture characterized by equity and inclusiveness (OPS, 2018, p. 12); Standard 7: The effective educational leader develops and sustains positive partnerships with and among students, staff and stakeholders to create a safe and caring school environment (OPS, 2018, p. 12); and Standard 8: The effective educational leader develops and sustains partnerships with families and the community by acknowledging the school as a community resource and understanding the context of its existence within the larger community (OPS, 2018,p. 12).

Domain 4 is identified as the Management Domain (OPS, 2018, p. 14). Within the Management Domain are Standard 9: The effective educational leader is integral to the recruitment, hiring and assignment of staff to ensure that the representation of diverse expertise and skill sets are aligned to the priorities of the focused plan while also promoting staff professional growth, cultural competence and opportunities for leadership (OPS, 2018, p.14); and Standard 10: The effective educational leader develops and implements structures to maximize learning through relationships, management, fiscal responsibility and adherence to district and state laws, policies and procedures (OPS, 2018, p. 14).

The standards contained in PSEL 2015 and OPS 2018 are used to inform program and curricular development for the training of pre-service school leaders (OPS, 2018).

To be eligible for principal licensure in the State of Ohio, an individual must meet a number of qualifications that are outlined in Ohio Administrative Rule. The traditional pathway to principal licensure requires that a candidate earns a master's degree from an accredited university, completes a principal preparation program at an institution that is approved by the state, receives the recommendation of the dean of the educational leadership program at the institution where the principal preparation program was completed, complete the Ohio Assessment for Educators licensure exam in educational leadership, and have at least two years of experience teaching students in the grade levels for which the principal licensure is to be issued (ODE, 2018). Upon completion of all of the state requirements, an individual may apply to the State of Ohio for licensure.

In response to the requirement that a candidate participate in an approved principal preparation program, colleges and universities have taken on the responsibility of developing and delivering a formalized pathway for future school leaders. Principal preparation programs have used the ISLLC standards, the PSEL, and the state level OPS to guide program development.

The standards and best practices identified at the national and state level inform principal preparation programs and act to ensure that the focus of principal development and principal performance is on the responsibility of the educator as the instructional leader (Canole & Young, 2013).

	ISLLC (1996)	ISLLC (2008)	PSEL (2015)
Stakeholders Included in Development	National Association Leadership State Agency Representatives State Association Leadership Higher Education Officials	National Association Leadership State Agency Representatives State Association Leadership Higher Education Officials Policy Organization Representatives Researchers "Leaders in the field"	National Association Leadership State Government Representatives State Agency Representatives State Association Leadership Higher Education Representatives School Board Members Superintendents Principals Assistant Principals Curriculum Leaders Teachers Community Members
Number of Standards	Six	Six	Ten
Research Base	"Little consensus or research available to consortium" "Personal Experience and Perspectives of Consortium Representatives"	Stressed Newly Available Research 130 Empirical and Reference Studies by Scholars and Experts	Heavily Research Based Comprehensive Review of Empirical Research Over 1,000 School and District Leaders Participated in Surveys and Focus Groups 10 Separate Research Sub-Committees Strong Practitioner-Based Input
Focus of Standards	Productive Schools Productive Educational Leadership Enhanced Educational Outcomes	Broad Set of National Guidelines Improve Student Achievement Ed. Leadership based on New Research Improve Schools	Directed at Practitioners All Levels of Educational Leadership Emphasis on Student Learning Foundational Principles of Leadership Future Oriented Not Static
Use in the Field	Stewardship of Schools Educational Leadership Stimulate Dialog	Guide Policy Development Evaluation of Ed. Leaders Inform Leadership Prep. Programs Inform Licensure Requirements	Links Ed. Leadership and Student Achievement Guiding Document for Leader Preparation Programs Specific Knowledge, Skills, Dispositions

Figure 1.1. Progression of thought in development of principal practice.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the progression of thought influencing the development of best practices of school leaders. The evolution of the professional standards for school leaders from ISLLC 1996 through the revision of the ISLCC standards in 2008, and then through the development and publication of the PSEL standards in 2015 highlights a shift in focus, a commitment to the use of current research, and a change in the makeup of the stakeholders selected to participate in their development.

The process of standards development for each document, ISLLC through PSEL incorporated the use of specifically identified stakeholders in the design and drafting of the standards. The ISLLC standards of 1996 used a small group of stakeholders made up of representatives from national and state level educational associations and higher education officials. When the NPBEA began the process of revising the ISLLC standards

in 2008, there was a very purposeful attempt to seat a consortium of representatives from a larger cross section of stakeholders. In addition to the representatives from national and state associations and higher education officials, the NPBEA chose to include policy organization representatives, researchers involved in current educational leadership study, and a selection of individuals identified by state and national associations as “leaders in the field” (ISLLC, 2008). The attempt by the NPBEA to include these “leaders in the field” was a purposeful first attempt to inform the process of standards development with actual practitioners by including select professionals in the consortium process. The process undertaken for the development of PSEL 2015 demonstrated a major shift in thinking as every step of that process incorporated and placed a high value on input from educational leadership practitioners. In addition to similar national and state level representation as well as researchers involved in the study of educational leadership, the consortium chose to include local school leaders from school board members, superintendents, principals, assistant principals, curriculum leaders, teachers, and community members.

When the CCSO gathered in 1994 to develop the document that became the 1996 ISLLC standards, it was done so with what they described as very little available research regarding the professional practice of educational leaders and very little consensus amongst participants involved in the consortium to inform the process. They undertook the initial steps of standards development based upon the personal experiences and perspectives that each participant brought to the table. The ISLLC revision of 2008 showed a shift in the perspective of the NPBEA in the necessity that research form the foundation of any revision of the standards. The reconfigured consortium gathered newly

available research and specifically cited nearly 130 empirical and reference studies completed in the period of time between 1996 and 2008 by researchers studying educational leadership practice. By the time that the NPBEA gathered for the 2015 revision and updating of the standards that became PSEL, the research available to the consortium was substantial. The development of the PSEL standards was formed at inception by 10 separate research sub-committees that used comprehensive reviews of empirical research, the data generated by over 1,000 surveys and focus groups completed with educational leaders and stakeholders in the field.

The establishment of a research-based foundation for the standards as they evolved from 1996 through 2015 also provided a shift in the focus of the standards. The 1996 focus was on the creation of standards that would foster the creation of productive schools and productive school leaders. By 2008, the focus of the standards shifted to the desired outcome of positively impacting student achievement and initiating school improvement. The focus of the research-based development of the PSEL 2015 standards stressed the improvement of professional practice for all educational leaders, not just principals, placed an emphasis on student learning, and in an attempt to curtail the need for on-going periodic revision, identified that the standards of professional practice are not static, evolving with research and the changes in the field of education.

The changes in the focus of the standards throughout the development of the ISLLC 1996 through the PSEL 2015 systematically changed the way that the standards were used in the field. In 1996, the ISLLC standards were primarily used to guide the stewardship of schools and to stimulate dialog regarding the best practices of school leaders. The research available to the consortium expanded the intended uses for the

2008 ISLLC revision to provide a basis for the evaluation of school leaders and create a foundational document intended to inform policy development and guide leadership preparation and licensure programs. The PSEL 2015 incorporated a similar set of intended uses but asserted a sound research base, connecting successful educational leadership and student success, and attempting to identify the specific abilities and knowledge that educational leaders need to possess to effectively and positively impact student achievement.

An examination of the progression of thought involved in the evolution of the professional standards from ISLLC 1996 through PSEL 2008 reveals the purposeful expansion of the stakeholders who participated and the development of the standards to include practitioners from a variety of levels, the necessity of a relevant, comprehensive review of current research to inform the process, the connections between effective leadership and student achievement, and the importance that standards not only guide practice, but inform future leadership preparation.

University-based Principal Preparation Programs

Those charged with designing and delivering principal preparation programs continue to conceptualize what skills new educational leaders will need (Portin et al., 2003). Literature on current research regarding the preparatory development of the principal is sparse at best; and where it does exist, has focused mainly on the established, experienced principal developing instructional leadership skills (Gurley et al., 2015). This appears to be in response to the shift in recent decades for the role of the principal as primarily responsible for managerial tasks, to a role with primary responsibility, and ultimate accountability, as the instructional leader for student learning and growth.

(Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000). It is that identification of the school principal as the instructional leader that has led to the focusing of school reform and accountability measures specifically on the principal (Davis et al., 2005).

The ISLLC standards, PSEL, and OPS illustrate that there has always been an attempt to quantify and develop leadership standards to assist in the process of assessing and selecting school leaders, specifically, principals (Wildy, Pepper, & Guanzhong, 2011). The process is key in developing future principals and preparing viable, competent school leaders for the future (Madden, 2008; May, 2016).

The university programs for preparing principals are in the midst of change as researchers struggle to grasp the evolving role of the school principal (Huber, 2008). In the early 2000s Levine (2005) harshly criticized the university-based programs charged with developing school leaders as inadequate and cited in his research that the coursework often required by these programs was disconnected from the realities of a principal's typical responsibilities. Studies in the area of school leadership bear out a seemingly obvious fact that graduate study and effective university-based principal preparation programs alone do not necessarily equate to more capable school leaders (Malone, 2001). Despite academia's desire to standardize, define, and program the teaching of specific leadership skill sets, the focus needs to be on strategies that are practical in the way that they authentically, thoughtfully, and appropriately assess and develop leadership capacity (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliot, & Cravens 2009). Despite the variance in program structure and status, the choice of which collegiate program a principal candidate participated in had little to no effect on the ultimate effectiveness of the principal (Clark et al., 2009). If university-based principal

preparation programs knew exactly what specific expectations would be placed on future principals, preparation programs that are designed to address those expectations would have an advantage when teaching specific leadership skills; however, the process continues to be an uncertain science (Walker & Kwan, 2012). The reality of the position and the ever-widening array of challenges that present themselves each day, highlight the needed improvement in university-based preparation programs to formally include authentic experiences as part of principal preparation (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Donmoyer (2012) noted that established principal preparation programs lack the socialization effects required for success. Current critiques of education leadership preparation programs reveal that there is entirely too much focus on general managerial principles as opposed to the development of leadership skills (Phillips, 2013).

The field of educational leadership needs a deeper analysis of what the specific strengths and weaknesses are in existing leadership preparation programs and what needs to be done to improve them (Christie et al., 2009). When principals reflect on their preparatory experiences, they often reflect on the inadequacy of the university educational leadership preparation programs in which they participated (Kwan, 2009). There appears to be a lack of strong clinical training components that require field experience in collaboration with strong role models (Peterson, 2002). Principal preparation programs have demonstrated a focus on standardizing a job often defined by a need for flexibility. As this adherence to rigid, easily quantified, standards driven professional development becomes more glaring, there is a growing call for a change to this status quo (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011). Principal preparation programs need to re-evaluate their targets (Petzko, 2008). In an era of tremendous reform and social

change, principals, by no fault of their own and at no fault to the principal preparation programs that trained them, find themselves unprepared to lead the new agendas that they are charged with leading, feeling trained and educated for jobs that no longer exist (Levine, 2005). In this era of leadership accountability for school reform, principal preparation programs must ensure that candidates are exposed to field experiences that involve a high level of rigor with school change initiatives (Fullan, 2007).

There is growing consensus in the field that for principal preparation programs to be effective there needs to be a purposeful attempt to combine the teaching of theory with application in practice, providing structured experiences under the supervision of experienced peers, followed by opportunities to reflect on the outcomes (Peterson, 2001). The need for the development of authentic learning experiences can be met by pre-service principal preparation programs by shifting the emphasis to field-based experiences and internships (Hitt et al., 2012).

Principal preparation programs historically provide inadequate clinical training and often deliver curriculum that is disjointed and not reflective of the realities in the field (Levine, 2005). Leadership preparation programs have to find a way to challenge future principals to practice theory learned in the classroom in a variety of real-world experiences with real-world problems (Clarke & Wildy, 2010).

There is a need for principal preparation programs to stop teaching management strategies through lecture-based paradigms and shift to a model of instructional delivery that stresses the importance of fieldwork (Perez et al., 2011). Orr (2006) cited the need for programs to offer strong theoretical content followed by challenging, relevant, field experiences. Effective principal preparation programs strive to integrate coursework with

field experience, incorporate the use of mentor principals, and provide future principals a way to apply skills learned to in the classroom in real life situations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Preparation programs must strive to provide a link between theory and experience through the use of the internship (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Huber (2008) stressed the importance of a principal candidate being able to use the internship model to synthesize previous coursework with practical experiences.

In the study of leadership preparation programs, clinical field work is a necessity in leadership development (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr & Barber, 2007). Cunningham and Cordiero (2009) made a tangible connection to experiential learning theory when they stated that field work and internships incorporated into principal preparation programs become meaningful learning experiences when they include the opportunity for learners to reflect on the connections between the content learned in class and the challenges discovered in the field. Hord (2009) also identified active participation followed by reflective processes as key to professional growth. The internship becomes the learning environment, bringing theory and experience together, providing an opportunity for an adult learner to reflect of their performance and outcome, and subsequently use that reflection to inform and guide interaction and decisions in future experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The strongest outcomes for pre-service school principals are noted when their preparation is capped by full-time administrative practicums, mentored by experienced, effective principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry et al., 2005; Lovely, 2004; Wallace, 2013). However, most pre-service school leaders are typically employed full time and cannot take a leave of absence to participate in full-time practicums, requiring

those responsible for designing and delivering preparation programs to identify the specific experiences and skills that hold the highest value in the growth of future building leaders and deliver those in existing time bound structures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry et al., 2005; Lovely, 2004; Wallace, 2013).

Impact of the Building Principal on Student Outcomes

The widely accepted fact that quality school leadership provides such a positively dramatic effect on student learning reinforces the fact that providing schools with effective principals needs to be a top priority in the field of education (Sun, 2011). The hiring of a prepared, effective principal is one of the most impactful decision that a school district can make in pursuit of instructional goals (Elmore & Burney, 2000).

Principals are the second most impactful factor, next to teacher effectiveness, affecting student achievement, learning, and growth (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). With principal effectiveness only eclipsed by teacher effectiveness in regard to their impact on student achievement, it must be noted that stable, high quality teacher performance is dependent on the ability of their leaders (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Robinson et al., 2008). Appropriately, principals are responsible for the achievement of their students; therefore, preparing future leaders to face this accountability takes on a much higher priority (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). High performing schools have effective principals, and in the work of the school, organizational capacity is directly impacted by the quality and effectiveness of principals (Walker, Bryant, & Lee, 2013). Effective principals can positively affect standardized test scores by up to 10 percentile points in one year (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Research continues to provide evidence that principals strongly and directly influence student achievement (Fuller et al., 2007;

Shortridge 2015). As a result, an effective principal becomes one of the most critical ingredients in an effective school (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Robbins & Alvy, 2014). Through an analysis of over 80,000 separate research studies, Hattie (2009) identified 250 separate factors that impact student achievement and calculated the effect size for each. The performance of the principal is identified as a factor that has a positive effect on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). In addition, the performance of the principal has the capability of providing direct impact on a significant number of the other factors with positive effect sizes, making the impact of the principal of greater import (Hattie, 2009).

The principal plays a pivotal role in student achievement despite the almost insurmountable and layered demands on those motivated enough to undertake the principal role in today's schools (Davis et al., 2005). Those layered demands often lead to quality candidates leaving the position. In fact, current statistics indicate that nearly 50% of all new principals vacate the role in less than three years (Superville, 2014). This attrition has a destabilizing effect on schools and ultimately student achievement, making the retention of a talented principal through the process of preparing the principal for the challenges and pressures of the job vital to the success of a school (Superville, 2014).

Transient principals equal transient teachers; subsequently, the ability of a principal to stay in a school directly impacts the retention of talented teachers (Beteille et al., 2012, Miller 2009). Principals can positively impact student success by recruiting and developing effective teachers and through the refinement and supervision of building level procedures (Davis et al., 2005). In cases where teachers do in fact choose to vacate their position, stable, established principals can replace departing teachers with higher

quality teachers, and through this teacher turnover, positively impacting student achievement (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2012). Often, growth requires a change, and leadership is identified as the primary catalyst for change in schools (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Principals who leave the position often identify three causal factors for their lack of success including a perceived lack of support, a lack of clarity in exactly what they are responsible for, and a deep-seated feeling that they lacked adequate preparation for the role of principal (Superville, 2014). Quality training for early career principals is critical, as principals who feel prepared fare better in terms of longevity and satisfaction, and in return, lower principal turnover equals higher student performance (Mitgang & Gill, 2012).

A Shortage of Candidates

Beginning in the mid 1990s, a shortage of viable candidates for principal positions developed, highlighting the need for the development of programs dedicated to the preparation of school leaders (Thompson, 2010). There are over 93,000 public school principals employed in the United States. Of that number, the United States Department of Labor reported that, as education entered the 21st century, approximately 40% of them are nearing retirement, and this “graying” population of school leaders will create a massive shortage of principals upon their departure from the field (Blackman & Fenwick, 2000). The expanding job description and the stress associated with the role will serve to accelerate the attrition of the existing school principal ranks (Gates et al., 2006). The attrition is more severe in urban and rural schools, schools with greater diversity, higher poverty, and in schools with historically lower student achievement (Olson, 2008). When

taking into consideration the number of principals deciding to leave the position during their first three years added to the number of principals nearing retirement, current literature identifies that there are not enough adequately prepared building leaders to take their place, leading to the imperative that leadership development not be left to chance, but instead be the product of a purposeful, systemic effort (Thompson, 2010). The national shortage of principals drives the need for the support and development of current principals and the cultivation of future principals through the design of high-quality principal preparation programs (Johnson, 2004; Olson, 2008; Walker & Dimmock, 2006; Wallin, 2006).

When examining the attrition of early career principals in their first three years of service, accountability versus control, a sense of isolation, an insurmountable work-load during an on-average work day that often exceeds 10 hours per day, and an overwhelming feeling of being unprepared for the challenges of the principal position were all cited as primary reasons why early career principals voluntarily left the job (Johnson 2005; Usdan et al., 2000). A study of entry-year principals revealed that many felt that they were not prepared for the time commitment to the job, the pace of the work, or the unanticipated range of responsibilities that they faced (Sackney & Walker, 2006). The complex, competing, and often concurrent demands placed upon principals, combined with a pattern of ever-tightening fiscal resources, often reduces the likelihood that a principal can meet the expectations of being an effective instructional leader (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

As previously stated, recruiting and hiring a principal is the most impactful and significant decision that a school district can make (Elmore & Burney, 2000). The

principal can provide a supportive, stable, and predictable setting within which effective teachers can successfully perform (Blasé, Blasé, & Phillips, 2010). Johnson (2006) describes the principal as a “broker of workplace conditions” (p. 15). The principal is the primary catalyst to impacting school change (Mitgang, 2008). That change can be positive or negative, as effective principals can cause great teachers to stay and underperforming teachers to leave, or, in the case of ineffective principals, mediocre and underperforming teachers stay and effective teachers choose to leave (Mitgang, 2008). This raises the stakes on the process of principal preparation as reversing the impact of hiring a poorly prepared principal can take years (Mitgang, 2008).

The current climate in education, specifically the accountability measures paired with the scarcity of functional preparation, will continue to accelerate the attrition from the principal ranks, either to retirement, return to the classroom, or exit from the field of education altogether (Gates et al., 2006).

The Assistant Principal

The pattern is well established. Teachers who show an interest in, or who demonstrate strength in some aspect of curricular leadership, are encouraged to pursue an advanced degree and complete the requirements for principal licensure. (Goddard et al., 2007; Goddard et al., 2010; Grossman et al., 2012; Ronfelt, 2015). Nearly 50% of the public-school teachers in the nation have earned advanced degrees qualifying them for principal licensure (Malone, 2001). Of the educators who have reached this step, very few of them express any interest in making application to an administrative position (Malone, 2001). In fact, the MetLife survey of the American Teacher conducted in 2013 identified 84% of teachers stated that they were *not very* or *not at all* interested in

becoming a principal. It is not unusual to encounter a large number of classroom teachers who have acquired administrative credentials and subsequently choose to stay in the classroom as they may have sought the licensure as a means for advancement on salary structures that are linked to the accumulation of graduate school coursework, while others finished the administrative degree but ultimately decided that their true love was classroom teaching (Howley, Andriomaivo, & Perry, 2005). A motivated few, after getting the licensure, take the next step and apply for entry level administrative positions, typically, for the position of assistant principal (Armstrong, 2004; Denmark & Davis, 2000).

Historically, the assistant principal position was initially developed by schools to address the rapidly expanding enrollment of many schools, and the subsequent overburdening of the principal (Mertz & McNeely, 1999). The position of assistant principal was, by the nature of the crisis that necessitated it, a pragmatic solution to an emergency rather than a well thought out position, with a clearly defined role on a school leadership team. The assistant principal became a tool to be used at the discretion of the principal, and the role of the assistant principal is often described as being ambiguous and without consistent definition (Marshall, & Hooley, 2006).

The assistant principal role is frequently identified as the necessary precursor to the principal position and, despite a glaring shortage of research into the specific professional steps that aspiring principals take, occupying the role of assistant principal is considered a longstanding pathway to the principalship (Armstrong 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark & Davis 2000; Winter, 2002).

One of the major problems is that while defined professional development pathways in recent years have been formalized for seated principals, most often directed at instructional leadership and data improvement, the assistant principal is frequently overlooked or excluded in the desired outcomes and descriptions, or at best, implied as if an afterthought in programming (Oliver, 2005). The omission is understandable when we study the pragmatic origins of the assistant principal position in the first place. Subsequently, there is very little research available for examining the professional development of the assistant principal (Oliver, 2005).

One reason for this is that researchers identify a true absence of a concrete definition of the role of an assistant principal (Marshall & Hooley 2006; May, 2016). This absence has created a wide variety in the individual responsibilities of assistant principals from setting to setting (May, 2016). As a result, there is not an accepted or clearly defined job description for assistant principals (Kwan, 2009; Marshall & Hooley 2006; May, 2016). The nature of the assistant principal role is designed to be responsive to moment-by-moment crisis which contributes to the pervasive absence of consistent, defined, job descriptions or any clear delineation of daily duties (Marshall & Hooley 2006; May, 2016).

A lack of citable research and the lack of any clear picture of the position of assistant principal add to the confusion regarding their roles and the ways to proactively address professional growth (May, 2016; Rogers, 2009). The role of an assistant principal is unique to education. Researchers, on occasion, have attempted to comprehensively describe the assistant principal role by identifying different areas of responsibility (Kwan, 2008). However, when examining their day-to-day

responsibilities, other researchers describe it as a position primarily based upon role ambiguity (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Frequently, the role ambiguity of the assistant principal position, given a set of duties traditionally different than those of a principal, not only discourages professional development but also inhibits an understanding of what specific skills a future leader needs to develop and practice (Chan et al., 2003). The ambiguity in roles is a major factor in administrative exhaustion, and the tension created by a conflict in role clarity was one primary indicator when studying administrative burn-out (Schermyly, Schermuly, & Meyer, 2010). If an administrator lacks a clear vision for what they are responsible for, it can be difficult to attribute success to effort, competence, or growth.

Marshall and Hooley (2006) observed that a candidate seeking an assistant principal position is often successful at securing said entry-level leadership position because they have built a resume and a set of strengths that demonstrates a level of competence and success in the teacher role. Subsequent career advancement to the principal role follows the same paradigm in that candidates seeking principal positions are required to have built a resume and a set of strengths that demonstrates a level of competence and success in the assistant principal role.

There is a widely-accepted assumption that the assistant principal role prepares candidates for a principal position, and that demonstrated success in the assistant principal role will facilitate advancement to the principal position (Daresh, 2004; Kwan, 2008; Oliver, 2003).

The problem exists in the tremendous variance in assistant principal experience. The role of the assistant principal has been neglected in research (Cranston et al., 2004;

Lopez, 2003; Marshall, 2006; Weller & Weller, 2002). If the role of the assistant principal is, as Marshall (2006) described, ill-defined and ambiguous, the goal of providing assistant principals with the necessary professional development and preparatory experiences to advance to the principal position is convoluted at best. If the mission is to develop the readiness of assistant principals to take on the role of principal, assistant principals need a clearly defined growth plan (Oliver, 2005). Often, the purposeful professional development of assistant principals is virtually nonexistent. They are relegated to a support role and are often seen as utilitarian in the accomplishment of goals for the principal that they serve. Assistant principals are not provided adequate opportunity to engage in the critical tasks required to understand or prepare for the role of principal (Inabinett, 2015). Principal preparation requires very specific training (Vogel, 2014). Choosing the right candidate to be a principal is only half of the equation, as providing that new principal with opportunities to develop the needed set of skills is the more important half off the equation (Christie et al., 2009). After acquiring a principal position, many former assistant principals comment that they felt unprepared for the role of principal (Busch et al., 2010; Kwan, 2009; May, 2016). When questioned, the assistant principal can readily identify the limited areas where they had confidence within the competencies required for the principal role (Ng, 2013).

Assistant principals who openly stated that they did not feel adequately prepared for the administrative roles that they undertook when they started, when questioned about their preparation for the principal position, describe that they primarily gained leadership competency through on-the-job experiences (Oleszewski et al., 2012).

The specific duties of assistant principals are traditionally assigned by the principal, and there is a great deal of variance in job responsibilities and variance in the structure of the professional relationship between the principal and assistant principal (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; May, 2016; Rogers, 2009). The way that the principal and assistant principal interact can be a key aspect in how duties are assigned (Marshall & Hooley 2006; May, 2016). As the responsibilities and description of the principal position expands, the idea that principals do not need to perform all of the functions assigned to them; instead, embracing the concept that delegation of principal duties to an assistant principal, as long it is accompanied by the principal ultimately accepting responsibility for task completion is an acceptable and necessary survival strategy (Portin et al., 2003). Unfortunately, the duties assigned to assistant principals are often chosen from duties that the principal does not want to handle himself (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; May, 2016). This creates an inherent paradox and leads to the conclusion that effective mentorship of entry level assistant principals must be purposeful, even in the way that leadership tasks are distributed, as the assistant principal role can and should be designed to facilitate preparation for the principal role (Denmark & Davis, 2000). In order to accomplish this goal, principals need to stress the importance of assistant principals learning as much as possible about the principal position (Busch et al., 2010; May, 2016).

The success of principals as they begin can be heavily influenced by their experiences in the assistant principal position (Bastian & Henry, 2015). An examination of the specific supports required by assistant principals in their preparation for the principal job is necessary if those responsible for the development, supervision, and

mentorship of assistant principals are to meet the goal of developing the next generation of educational leaders (Madden 2008, May, 2016).

The Relationship of the Principal and Assistant Principal

The approach that a principal takes can be a vital ingredient in the professional development of future educational leaders under their influence, specifically the assistant principal (Klar, 2012; Klar, Huggins, Hammonds, & Buskey, 2016; Margolis & Huggins, 2012).

The responsibility of a principal to nurture and develop the skills of future educational leaders, while often left as an afterthought in the list of primary duties, is not only a critical responsibility, but frequently vital to their own success at accomplishing leadership goals (Robbins & Alvy, 2014; Urick & Bowers, 2014).

To effectively meet the varied challenges that schools face each day, a principal must develop a team of administrators that communicate and work well together (Finkel, 2012; Robbins & Alvy, 2014). School leadership teams that are identified as effective have developed the ability to communicate and work together on the tasks necessary to support instructional improvement and student achievement (Hulpia, DeVos, & Van Keer, 2009; Robbins & Alvy, 2014).

Trust between members of a leadership team is a byproduct of relationship development and the foundation of effective school leadership (Robbins & Alvy, 2014; Witmer, 2005). The development of trust between members of an administrative team is the first step in their professional development as it reduces the feeling of vulnerability which in turn encourages less experienced members of an administrative team to try new approaches and face new tasks (Johnson, 2004; Robbins & Alvy, 2014). A principal's

instructional agenda for their school will not be advanced without the trust developed through day-to-day mentorship of other members of the leadership team (Johnson, 2004; Robbins & Alvy, 2014). Trust, not pedagogy, is the cornerstone of instructional success for schools (Johnson, 2004; Robbins & Alvy, 2014).

Communication and trust should lead to team dynamics that facilitate an assistant principal carrying responsibilities for building leadership that goes beyond the typical discipline and functional management duties traditionally assigned to them by the principal (Finkel, 2012; Ribbins, 1997; Robbins & Alvy, 2014).

In many schools, the nature of a small leadership team made up of a principal and assistant principal require that they develop a close working relationship quickly, and that they both view their commitment to instructional support and student achievement as a primary job function (Price, 2012; Robbins & Alvy, 2014). When working with assistant principals, a principal must pay particular attention to the assignment of, and division of professional responsibilities, and ensure that frequent communication regarding those duties occurs to avoid the development of resentment or friction within the leadership team (Hulpia et al., 2009; Robbins & Alvy, 2014).

To be effective leaders, administrators need to develop an understanding of the specific strengths and challenges of a school, making the lines of communication between principals and assistant principals critical (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Robbins & Alvy, 2014). Often, assistant principals are promoted to the principal position in the same building where they served as assistant principal (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Robbins & Alvy, 2014). The common practice of selecting the next principal for a school building from existing assistant principals can be challenging without a leadership pattern

that stressed open communication and teamwork between administrators (Kwan, 2009; Robbins & Alvy, 2014).

While the buck stops with the principal in terms of accountability, effective school leadership is the responsibility of the entire administrative team, and it is ultimately the job of the principal to mentor administrative team members through a purposeful process of professional development (Robbins & Alvy, 2014; Urick & Bowers, 2014). Effective principals can mitigate the strenuous demands of the assistant principal job, providing time and support for required reflection and collaboration and ensuring the job- embedded training that assistant principals need for successful navigation along the path to the principal role (Chan et al., 2003; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Wong, 2004). Assistant principals have a clearly identified need for strong mentorship, a need for support in navigating the complex role within the school leadership structure, and specialized training available only through tangible experience driving the need for researchers to continue to investigate the role that experienced principals can play in the professional development of assistant principal's capacity for leadership, as they prepare for the principal role (Lile, 2008; Mangin, 2007; Ylimaki, Jacobson, & Drysdale, 2007).

The Impact of Gender

In America's public schools, women represent over 70% of the teacher ranks, but less than 30% of the secondary school principalships reinforcing the point that the secondary principalship is defined by the male gender (Arthur & Salsberry, 2005; Mertz, & McNeely, 1998). Researchers also note that while enrollment in post-graduate educational leadership programs is 50% female, only 10% of female graduates attain

leadership credentials and enter a principal or other central office position (Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2007). The potential causal factors for the apparent disparity are numerous but appear to be primarily attributable to a social perspective that women are teachers and not leaders (Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2007). Women may see the principal position as unattainable based upon the need for aspiring school leaders to have role models in the desired positions, and the minimal number of female principals facilitates fewer women from pursuing the position (Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2007).

The attrition of women in educational leadership roles may also be at a higher rate, as female principals report feelings of marginalization and heightened criticism based upon their gender (Arthur & Salsberry, 2005).

The Role of Succession Programs in Principal Preparation

In a response to the growing shortage of qualified school principals, many schools and school districts have resorted to a range of home-grown leadership programs designed and delivered at the district level (Olson, 2007). Research regarding the preparation of the assistant principal for advancement to the principal role is typically evident only in the observation that larger, often urban, districts are encouraged to develop succession programs for leaders, basically grooming, and preparing future leaders from within their existing workforce (Gurley et al., 2015). Research into the initiative of developing building leaders from within teacher ranks has yielded mixed results in regards to the number of, and quality of, school principals produced by these programs, as the programs often produce a cadre of leaders with relatively finite and ungeneralizable set of skills, and a sense of frustration (Hargreaves, 2005; Peters, 2011; Schecter & Tishler, 2007). One of the criticisms of the formalized succession program is

that the artificial unions of mentor and mentee created by assigning mentors can often lead to resentment by mentors who have little say in who is assigned to them as a mentee, and a lack of the authentic, naturally occurring support systems and spontaneously presented learning opportunities usually associated with real life principal-assistant principal relationships (Samier, 2000).

Succession programs are designed with the intent of ensuring that schools not only keep their entry level leaders energized but also facilitate the acquisition of the fundamental skills necessary to assume the building leadership roles within their institutions when the time comes (Gurley et al., 2015). There is not a strong relationship between these formalized district level professional development activities and principal preparation (Thompson, 2010).

The impending shortage of qualified principal candidates makes the development of aspiring school leaders a critical mission and incorporated in that mission is the necessity that the establishment and development of any formal training or succession programs include an effective mentorship component, specifically, collaboration with successful and established school leaders (Zepeda, Bengston & Parylo, 2011).

The Role of Mentorship in Principal Preparation

One of the most common tools used in the development and support of new administrators is the use of mentors (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2008; Daresh, 2004, 2010; Weindling, 2004). Mentorship can impact a number of high stakes ventures including the development, support, and retention of emerging school leaders (Weingartner, 2008; Young, Sheets, & Knight, 2005). When assistant principals are provided competent mentors, they are afforded an opportunity to accelerate the development of their

leadership skills beyond the historically defined, functional, and pragmatic assistant principal responsibilities (Good, 2008).

Investment in the mentorship model by established principals is not difficult to cultivate as “effective principals are mentors by nature” (Calabrese & Tucker-Ladd, 1991, p. 68). The most effective mentorship experiences are ones that incorporate existing, authentic relationships and occur within a stable, professional setting where skills can be developed, assessed, and refined under the supervision of a mentor principal (Bollier, 2013). By capitalizing on the knowledge of experienced administrators, school districts help new assistant principals succeed (Blackman, & Fenwick, 2000). While the importance of mentorship in the development of leadership skills is significant, it also plays a critical role in the maintenance and permanence of those newly acquired skills (Blackman & Fenwick, 2000).

Removing barriers to mentorship by experienced principals is key to future progress (Curry, 2009). Experienced leaders in the mentor role can provide guidance in much more than procedural training. Veteran principals can offer counsel and support in many areas of leadership including modeling in the development of an awareness to the political nature of leadership positions (Schmidt, 2010).

Mentorship is critical to the development of school leaders (Weingartner, 2008; Young et al., 2005). This appears especially true for women, as research into the educational preparation for the management roles associated with the principalship revealed a defined masculine bias (Smith, 1997).

Over 70% of the survey respondents participating in a study regarding the factors that influence the low number of women in the principal role identified both the lack of

women available as principal role models and the subsequent lack of woman to woman mentoring accessible to aspiring female leaders as the top two reasons (Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2007). This is true especially when examining the secondary school level where there are less established and developed mentorship systems available to prospective school leadership who happen to be women (Glass, 2000; Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2007).

The ultimate goal of quality principal preparation programs is to develop principals who positively impact the quality of instruction delivered to students by teachers in their buildings (Fuller et al., 2011). There are common aspects of preparation programs that best prepare aspiring principals (Walker et al., 2013). The support and mentorship of assistant principals must be directed at the nurturing of skills that foster instructional leadership, the supervision of best-practice, the interpersonal skills to facilitate collaboration, networking, and an understanding of the reality of the role of the principal (Gurley et al., 2015).

There needs to be a shift in focus from evaluating early career principals and holding them accountable through oversight to a system that stresses mentorship and the creation of partnerships with experienced leaders and targeted capacity-building support (Bottom & Fry, 2009). It is important that the mentorship of assistant principals not only focus on their professional development but also that it instills and reinforces the motivation and support systems necessary to advance to the principal role (Oleszewski et al., 2012).

Contrary to the wisdom of mentorship, the preparation of instructional leaders in recent years has focused primarily on standards-based initiatives, and this focus has

created a climate that has encouraged conformity and diminished the creativity that is often required in situations encountered by principals (Roach et al., 2011). There are concerns that recent policies and programs focused on the development and the use of formalized succession and induction programs have missed their intended goals (Fuller & Brewer, 2005; Peske & Haycock, 2006).

Mentorship involves a serious desire on the part of a principal to perform mentoring duties, and that just because a principal is assigned as a mentor, either by purposeful assignment within school district structure, or simply by positional authority, attention must be paid to the capacity of the principal to act as a mentor (Daresh, 2004).

Many assistant principals only experience the mentorship of one principal during their tenure as an assistant principal making the consequences of their mentee experience, whether positive or negative, potentially career altering (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Robbins & Alvy, 2014).

Learning Through Experience

The real preparation for the principal position begins after an educator has completed a formalized principal preparation program and secured licensure to practice (Vogel & Weiler, 2014). When a newly licensed entry level administrator is hired, often in the role of assistant principal, it is assumed they possess a minimum, or entry-level understanding of what it truly takes to lead a school (Adams & Copland, 2007). As stated, the assistant principal position is traditionally a pathway to the principal position (Armstrong, 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark & Davis, 2000; Winter, 2002). Principal preparation programs, university coursework, and formalized leadership programs typically prepare candidates for the principal position, not the assistant principal position

(Marshall & Hooley, 2006). It becomes the responsibility of a school district, specifically principals in the mentor role, to develop the leadership capacity of new administrative hires (Adams & Copland, 2007).

“The effectiveness of early career principals may be affected by the environment where they served as assistant principals” (Bastian, & Henry, 2015, p. 601). Given this proposal, the experiences that assistant principals encounter during their time in that position take on a particularly high stakes nature. Assistant principals spend, on average, just over five years in the position before moving into the position of principal (Bastian & Henry, 2015). While there may be isolated exceptions, it is highly probable that building leaders were recruited from the assistant principal ranks (Armstrong, 2004; Denmark & Davis, 2000). The first three years on the job provide experiences critical to the growth and vigilance of school leaders (Clark et al., 2009).

The importance of assistant principals learning new skills while immersed in the workplace is important because, in many schools, the assistant principal is not only an important member of the building leadership team, they are statistically more than likely to be the next principal (Kwan, 2008).

All professionals selected and hired into an assistant principal position have completed a university-based principal preparation and attained the licensure required to hold the job. However, university training programs and licensure testing alone have little positive effect on an individual’s successful transition to the principal position (Leithwood et al., 2008). “Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices” (p. 27); however, success is ultimately defined by the contexts within which the practices manifest themselves and the way in which a leader chooses to

employ the practices (Leithwood et al., 2008). The most influential factor in the development of these leadership practices is on-the-job experience (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2012; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

Education breeds its own leaders, and to this end, there is an obvious need for effective, on-the-job experiences designed to facilitate professional growth (Malone, 2001). The most important word in the previous statement is the word designed. Making the preparation of assistant principals a designed or purposeful activity challenges the well-entrenched belief that the simple performance of the traditional requirements of the assistant principal role provides adequate experience for assuming building leadership as the principal (Kwan, 2008).

Setting clear expectations, and then prescribing and providing on-the-job learning experiences aligned with those expectations is a necessary step to developing great leaders (Seashore-Louis et al, 2010). Principal training needs to focus on the development of situational decision-making capacity (Sherman, 2008). The identity of a school leader is built over time and based upon the acquisition of situational competency. Leadership development programs need to examine the experiential process that goes into the construction of that identity (Moorosi, 2014). Administrators, when asked to reflect on their initial experiences in their leadership role, identified that they acquired the necessary skills to be successful leaders through specific experiences and opportunities only available while on the job (Thessin & Clayton, 2013).

Exposing assistant principals to authentic experiences, closely facilitating reflection and providing support throughout the process with natural consequences and outcomes are foundational parts of the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984). Two

major elements in andragogy indicate that an adult learner changes within the learning process and that the process of learner growth can be used to drive further change (Knowles, 1980).

Tangible experience does not often happen in a prescribed way as it occurs immersed in the field, presented with authentic stimuli and situational uniqueness. (Kolb, 1984). Borden, Preskill, and DeMoss (2012) cited the necessity that training for principals occur through real-life experiences. In addition to prescribed job-embedded experiences, the ability for mentor principals and district leaders to monitor the performance of, and facilitate ongoing discussion with, early career principals about their experiences needs to be an area of focus (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

Many schools have highly motivated, competent, talented professionals at the helm; and research indicates that the more experience they had, under competent leadership during their formative years, the more capacity for effective leadership they developed (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2009; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

As stated, “The principal has a professional responsibility to train the assistant principal and to promote personal and professional growth” (Calabrese & Tucker-Ladd, 1991, p. 74). When a principal assigns specific duties to an assistant principal that demonstrate a sharing of traditional principal responsibilities, as opposed to the assignment of managerial tasks and less desirable routines, the improved relationship and partnership facilitates greater growth in assistant principal skills (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; May, 2016).

Principal growth and skill acquisition are significant during their first three years in a leadership role (Branch et al., 2012). Assistant principals need to use those three years to make sense of the job, and this sense making is vital in the acquisition of leadership skills and their capacity for future leadership development (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2017).

The emerging leader needs specific individualized attention directed at the prioritizing of personal targets for development, in effect, one size does not fit all (Thessin & Clayton, 2013). Guidance, support, and autonomy were identified as key items by developing principals in their early years (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). Any model for training needs to ensure that it is personalized, sustainable, and supported by authentic structures within the environment (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Andragogy and experiential learning theory both place a premium on the naturally occurring consequences that flow from new experiences, as success or failure must be attributable to personal effort and impact (Knowles, 1980; Kolb, 1984).

Current research combined with current necessity suggests that, as we examine the opportunities afforded our prospective building leaders, it is time to take a more strategic approach to what has largely, up to this point, been an informal isolated experience (Bartoletti, Anthony, & McMillan, 2016). Emerging school leaders must develop an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses and, during the formative years spent in the assistant principal role, seek out, or be provided, additional spontaneous learning opportunities (Gratto, 2016). The most effective leaders develop a pattern of continuous learning (Greer, 2011). The surveying of assistant principals who subsequently advanced to the principal position reveals that there is a difference in their

assessment of the ways that different tasks prepared them for the principal job (Madden, 2008; May, 2016).

Summary

The review of current literature provided a number of factors that may have an impact on the rate and effectiveness of professional development of assistant principals as they prepare for the principal role. The research confirms that the concept of job satisfaction and resiliency, the development of a sense of psychological empowerment, the structure of the mentor-mentee relationship, and the purposeful assignment of professional responsibilities and opportunities by a supervising principal all have an impact on the professional preparation of building level leaders and may influence whether or not they develop the capacity to advance to the principal position. Fast forward nearly 200 years since the inception of the principal position, and while the specific duties assigned to the principal today have changed, the fundamental challenges faced by schools in the mid-19th century related to the preparation, recruitment, and development of the principal position continue to plague the field of modern education. It appears that the true challenge for the field of education exists regarding its ability to develop and sustain effective school building leadership.

The question remains, in that situation, what specific, critical experiences, and professional development opportunities does an assistant principal encounter that maximizes leadership growth? How can an experienced principal in the role of mentor, or, by way of experiential learning, an instructor, create a series of responsibilities and experiences that aid in an ability to generalize critical skills learned and aid in that professional growth? Assistant principals must force themselves to ask difficult

questions. They are not passive participants in this process. The concerns regarding the dwindling pool of talented, motivated, and well-trained principal candidates drives this study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the methodology used to explore the professional development of entry-year secondary assistant principals as they acquire the skills necessary for advancement to the principal position. The researcher chose to use a qualitative phenomenological research model incorporating the use of multiple focus groups. The focus group participants were both entry-year secondary assistant principals reflecting on their first year in the position and experienced secondary principals reflecting on both their own experience as entry-year administrators and their supervision of entry-year assistant principals. The characteristics of the participant pools and sampling procedures are provided.

In addition to data gathered through the focus group process, the researcher used a survey tool provided to a significantly larger sample as a means to triangulate and corroborate the focus group findings. The use of the survey tool provided multiple data sources to triangulate with focus group interview data results.

A description of the research methods and data collection instruments, along with a description of the data analysis processes are included. The purpose of the research and the specific research questions are in this chapter. Following the data analysis section, the researcher explored issues related to the trustworthiness of qualitative study and phenomenological study in particular. Descriptions of the member checking process and discussion regarding the contextual nature of phenomenological data are also provided. The chapter closes with a researcher subjectivity statement and a brief summary of the study.

Research Purpose

The study examined the professional responsibilities and specific learning opportunities afforded assistant principals during their entry-year by a supervising principal. The study used the principles of andragogy and experiential learning to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the job embedded experiences that contribute to the acquisition of the skills necessary for assistant principals to advance successfully to the principalship. The necessity of research into the specific experiences that yield the highest possible level of personal and professional growth, and subsequently, the highest probability of an assistant principal acquiring a principal position, and then having the appropriate set of professional skills to succeed, drives this research study.

This study explored the specific job-embedded professional experiences of secondary school assistant principals that facilitated personal and professional growth in their preparation for advancement to the principal position. The purpose of this study led the researcher to the selection of the phenomenological qualitative research study design. Phenomenological qualitative research design incorporating the use of focus groups and surveys for data collection was chosen as the most appropriate method for the proposed research questions.

Research Questions

Within the conceptual framework of adult learning theory, the research questions sought to identify, describe, and validate the specific job-embedded professional experiences for the professional development of the secondary public school assistant principal.

Research Question 1

When providing narrative descriptions of their entry-year, what specific educational experiences do secondary school assistant principals identify as valuable and impactful to their preparation for advancement to the school principal position?

Research Question 2

Reflecting on their own personal entry-year experiences, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

Research Question 3

Reflecting on their professional experiences working with entry-year assistant principals, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful to current entry-year assistant principals in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

Research Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design. Specifically, phenomenology was chosen. Phenomenology is focused on an analysis of the life experiences of human beings and is used to gather data that permit the researcher to describe how individuals or groups of individuals experience a specific phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012). The method permits a researcher to identify meaning behind the described human experience of research subjects as it relates to a specific phenomenon or collective experience (Creswell, 2009, 2014). Phenomenological study allows for the collection of information

from study participants that minimizes researcher biases and assumptions related to a specific human experience and places an emphasis on the direct observation of participants and their first-hand descriptions of experiencing the identified phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Merriam (2002) identified how a researcher can gather raw data from interviews, conversations, and focus groups to build complex meanings out of the descriptions of participants' direct experiences. Phenomenology facilitates the analysis of an individual's experience for the purpose of identifying the common themes featured in the description of a person's experience or event (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007).

This study employed the use of focus groups to examine the job-embedded experiences of entry-year secondary assistant principals. Following the focus groups, the researcher used a data analysis process that identified common themes within the descriptions of participants' experiences and used those themes to construct a detailed composite description of the experience. That composite description was developed with the purpose of generalization to similar individuals or groups.

Sampling and Selection

Participants

Research data were collected from both experienced secondary school principals and from entry-year secondary school assistant principals. The participants selected for this study were currently licensed secondary school principals and secondary school assistant principals employed in public school districts within the State of Ohio.

There are currently 6,077 school administrators licensed and working in Ohio's 612 traditional public school districts (ODE, 2019). Within the Ohio public school

districts there are 6,077 school administrators, with approximately 2,012 employed in secondary schools (ODE, 2019). To address the identified research questions for this study, the principals and assistant principals included in the potential participant pool were required to meet specific criteria. Specifically, one pool required experienced secondary school building principals, while the second pool required entry-year secondary school assistant principals.

When examining the sheer number school principals licensed and employed within the State of Ohio, the researcher, in order to assist in the selection of a specific pool of potential research study participants, chose to identify and employ a set of previously vetted, established pools of principals and assistant principals already in use for other State programs. These pools were subsequently identified as the source for participant selection.

Beginning Administrators Mentorship Academy (BAMA)

In the spring of 2018, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) approached the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA) and the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA) with the goal of establishing a state-funded mentorship program for entry-year school administrators in the State of Ohio. For several years, OASSA and OAESA had established and delivered professional development programming to entry-year school principals and assistant principals incorporated into a program entitled the Beginning Administrators Academy (BAA). The professional development opportunities were offered at a cost to school districts, who subsequently enrolled their entry-year administrators.

In the spring of 2018, ODE provided the funding for a new mentorship program, expanding the existing BAA program and establishing the 2018 Beginning Administrators Mentorship Academy (BAMA). ODE provided the funding and oversight, while OASSA and OAESA staff managed and delivered the program. The new program expanded on the programming previously offered in the BAA with additional professional development sessions and the addition of a mentoring component.

School District Typology

For the purpose of research and analysis, the Ohio Department of Education classifies public school districts into four separate groups based upon shared demographics and geographical characteristics. The four public school district groups include urban, suburban, rural, and small town (ODE, 2019). Of the four identified groups, small town school districts posed the widest variability in selected demographic and geographic indicators.

In 2013, the descriptions of the groups were updated to account for newly identified variances in demographics that emerged as a result of a deeper analysis of district characteristics (ODE, 2019). One of those variations included the geographic identification of school districts located in the Appalachia region of Ohio (CORAS, 2019). Thirty-two of the 88 Ohio counties qualify under the Appalachian identifier. Of the 612 traditional public school districts in the State of Ohio, approximately 61% of them are identified as either urban or suburban, with approximately 39% of them being identified as rural and Appalachian (ODE, 2019).

Mentors

The first step in developing the mentoring component of the new BAMA program was the identification of experienced principals capable of providing mentorship to entry-year school administrators. The initial goal was to maintain a mentor to mentee ratio not to exceed 2:1. All mentors were employed in the school principal role. Those mentor principals were provided training as well as a \$2,000 stipend for their two-year commitment.

The criteria used for selection as a BAMA mentor required mentor applicants to fill out a comprehensive application and participate in an application process that included:

- Resume information.
- Demographic information and current role.
- Previous mentor experience.
- Current school district type, building enrollment, and free/reduced lunch percentages.
- Statement of interest in mentoring a beginning administrator.
- Relevant professional experiences.
- Self-assessment on the Ohio Principal Standards.
- Endorsement from their current school superintendent.

Upon completion of the application process, applicants were reviewed and vetted by the OASSA and OAESA BAMA coordinator. The selection process looked to identify experienced principals with at least five years of successful principal experience who displayed a goal-driven and reflective mindset, made collaborative decisions based

upon data, had exemplary listening skills, and was empathetic to the challenges of entry-year administrators and the level of confidentiality required to be an effective mentor. These experienced principals must also have an understanding of the Ohio Standards for Principals and have specific experience with the Ohio Principal Evaluation System and the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System. Experienced principals were asked to make a two-year commitment to the program.

Following the application, vetting, and selection process, 78 school principals were selected as BAMA mentor principals (OASSA, 2018).

Beginning Administrators

OASSA, OAESA, and ODE then employed a process incorporating the solicitation of their association memberships, the use of ODE publications, and mailings through the State of Ohio Superintendents Association (BASA) to recruit a pool of 150 entry-year school administrators. The mailings and solicitations specifically highlighted the ODE funding that would provide entry-year administrators two-years of mentorship and professional development, as well as two-year association membership at no cost to the school district.

The criteria for applying to the BAMA program required that applicants be first-year assistant principals or principals and that they be willing to commit to their own personal growth and the establishment and maintenance of a trusting open relationship with their assigned mentor. Applicants were required to make a commitment to all aspects and expectations of the BAMA program (BAMA, 2018).

Registration materials were included in the publications and mailings. School district leadership was then able to identify candidates at the district level and facilitate

application. The criteria used for selection as a BAMA participant required applicants to fill out a comprehensive application and participate in an application process that included:

- Resume information.
- Demographic information and current role.
- Current school district type, building enrollment, and free/reduced lunch percentages.
- Statement of interest in participation in the BAMA program.
- Self-Assessment on the Ohio Principal Standards.
- Endorsement from their current school superintendent.

The OASSA and OAESA program coordinator then accepted applications from entry-year school administrators. Given the history of suburban school districts having the necessary resources to annually enroll their entry-year administrators in the previous BAA programs and as criteria for the ODE funding, priority for inclusion in the BAMA program was given to applicants from school districts identified by ODE as urban, rural, and Appalachian. At the conclusion of the application and selection process, 150 entry-year school administrators were selected as 2018 BAMA participants (OASSA, 2018).

The 150 participants represented entry-year assistant principals and principals from both elementary and secondary schools, and from all four district designations, urban, suburban, rural, and Appalachian. All 150 participants received a fully funded scholarship for the program.

The 78 experienced principals selected as mentors, and the 150 entry-year administrators selected by ODE, OASSA, and OAESA as participants in the 2018

BAMA program were used as the two initial pools of potential participants for this study. The two groups represent an acceptable pool of potential subjects from which a specific criterion referenced sample may be extracted. The research questions require specific qualities in the sampling of the research participants. The following sub-headings explain the process by which the researcher narrowed the candidate pools using specific criteria.

Sample Size

The purpose of the research study was to examine the professional experiences of entry-year secondary school assistant principals as they prepared for advancement to the secondary principal role. The study incorporated the use of four focus groups using researcher designed interview questions to gather data from both experienced secondary principals and entry-year assistant principals.

The two focus groups incorporating experienced secondary principals as participants gathered data from the principals reflecting on both their own experiences with professional growth and from their observation of the growth of entry-year assistant principals working under their leadership. The two focus groups incorporating entry-year assistant principals as participants gathered data from the assistant principals reflecting on their experiences during the entry-year. Researchers are warned that qualitative research is extremely labor intensive and often time consuming and impractical (Green & Thorogood, 2009; Mason, 2010). Green and Thorogood (2009) and Mason (2010) recommended limiting the total number of participants in qualitative research studies to a number less than 20, citing that little new insight is gained by researchers analyzing transcribed data beyond that number.

Based upon the literature, the researcher selected five subjects for each of the four identified focus groups. The focus groups produced four separate transcripts for coding and interpretation.

The sample size chosen for the survey tool was significantly larger, with the survey being sent to all potential participants in the established candidate pools.

Sampling Procedures

Criterion sampling was used for this study based upon the researcher's desired characteristics of the participants. Criterion sampling, also referred to in research as purposeful sampling, involves the researcher selecting specific criteria or set of criteria that is applied to potential participants to create a participant pool that is information rich in the area, field, or phenomenon to be studied (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). As described in the participants section of this chapter, the research participants for the study were identified as experienced school building principals from the State of Ohio and entry-year assistant principals from the State of Ohio.

The purpose of the research was to focus specifically on the professional development of assistant principals in the secondary school setting. This focus required that the participants be currently employed in the secondary school setting. The secondary school setting is defined for the purposes of this study as serving a student population ranging from grades 5-12. Given the variance of grade configurations currently in place across Ohio, any combination or span of grade levels within the 5-12 grade band met research criteria.

Experienced Secondary School Principals

The 78 experienced principals chosen for inclusion in the 2018 BAMA program represented both experienced principals serving in the elementary setting as well as the secondary setting. Overall, there were 36 elementary principals and 42 secondary principals. These 42 secondary principals were then sorted into two separate groups. The first group was designated as Group A and included experienced secondary school principals currently serving in urban or suburban schools. The second group was designated as Group B and included experienced secondary school principals currently serving in rural or Appalachian schools. The identification of a school district as urban, suburban, rural, or Appalachian was based upon the typology designation of each school district as provided by the State Department of Education (ODE, 2019).

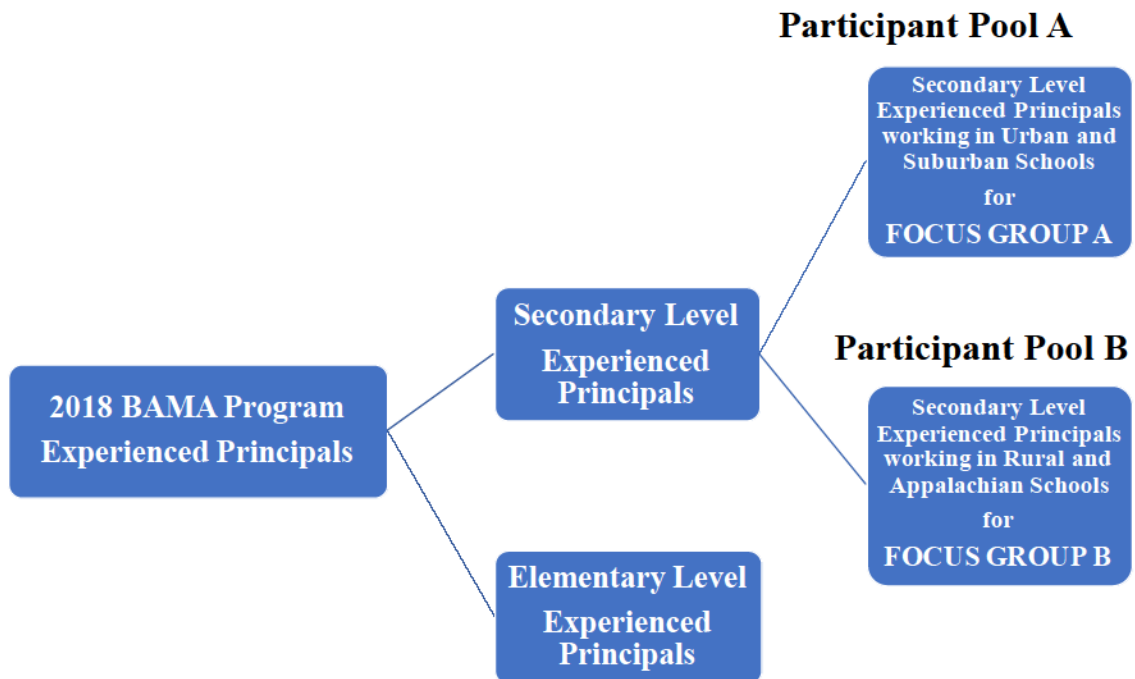


Figure 3.1. Focus groups A and B selection flow chart.

Entry-Year Secondary School Assistant Principals

The purpose of this research study was the examination of the experiences of entry-year secondary school assistant principals. That purpose required the application of the research subject criteria to screen the 150 entry-year administrators selected for the 2018 BAMA program to specifically identify those that were employed in the secondary school setting.

There were 75 secondary school entry-year administrators identified in the pool. The next step in the process required the separation of those 75 entry-year secondary school administrators by their position. Within the 75 entry-year secondary school administrators there were 20 principals and 51 assistant principals. The remaining four entry-year administrators were employed in other leadership positions. The proportion of entry-year principals to entry-year assistant principals is consistent with the observation that the assistant principal position is typically the entry level position for school leaders as they prepare for the principalship (Armstrong, 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark & Davis, 2000; Winter, 2002).

The final step in the creation of the participant pool from which research study participants were sampled involved the sorting of the entry-year secondary school assistant principals into two separate groups. The first group was designated as Group C and included entry-year secondary school assistant principals currently serving in urban or suburban schools. The second group was designated as Group D and included entry-year secondary school assistant principals currently serving in rural or Appalachian schools. The identification of a school district as urban, suburban, rural, or Appalachian

was based upon the typology designation of each school district as provided by the State Department of Education (ODE, 2019).

To assist the researcher in isolating and defining the entry-year as a set, finite experiential learning timeline regarding the descriptions of experiences and professional development, the groups identified as entry-year secondary school assistant principals C and D then went through an additional screening step. The researcher reviewed the professional resumes of all potential assistant principal participants in order to identify entry-year secondary school assistant principals that were new hires to the school in which they were beginning their administrative career, meaning that they were not employed in that school in the year immediately prior to their assuming the assistant principal position.

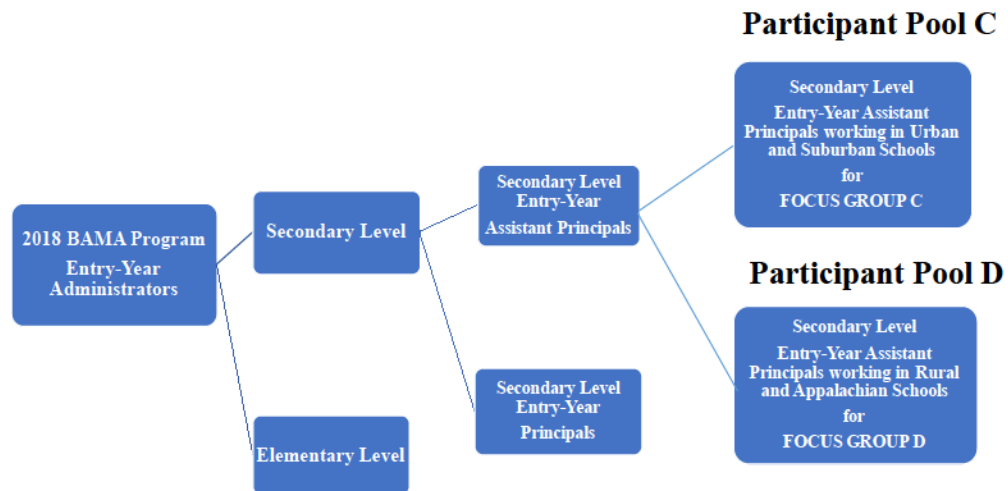


Figure 3.2. Focus groups C and D selection flow chart.

The steps in the sampling procedures involved the purposeful sorting of the two pools of potential participants into a number of different sub-groups from which the research study participants were selected. This sorting was conducted to facilitate four

separate sample groups that provided for an increased level of diversity and depth in the data collected. This depth and diversity in the sampling strategy were critical when examining the multiple perspectives of individual participants in phenomenological research as it assists in developing a more comprehensive description of the experience (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

The sampling process began with the selection of two established groups of potential research participants in the 2018 BAMA program participants. After the application of the research subject criteria to the experienced principals and the application of research subject criteria to the entry-year administrators, four separate pools of prospective research study participants were established. Those four participant candidate pools were identified as Groups A, B, C, and D. It was from these four groups that the participants in the four separate focus groups were selected.

The sampling process for recruiting the necessary research participants from the four identified research participant pools used an email invitation. Two separate email invitations were sent to the two separate candidates pools for the purpose of recruiting research participants and explained that they received the email because they met the criteria to be included in a research study examining the professional development of entry-year secondary school assistant principals. The first email was sent to the experienced secondary school principal candidates identified in participant pools A and B (Appendix A), while a second email was sent to entry-year secondary school assistant principal candidates in participant pools C and D (Appendix B).

The first five candidates from each participant pool to respond based upon the date and time of the email response were selected as research participants. The

researcher responded with a second email notifying each participant of their selection for the study. After confirmation that each of the volunteers was committed to the scheduled focus groups, the researcher sent an email to all members of each candidate pool thanking them for their time and notifying them that all research study participants had been selected. The researcher noted additional volunteers in the email responses that arrived after the fifth one in each pool as potential alternatives in case any of the selected five participants were forced to withdraw due to any unforeseen conflicts. The researcher sent schedule reminder emails to each research participant in the week preceding the scheduled time for each focus group.

The purpose of the sampling method used was to ensure the legitimate generalizability of the conclusions drawn regarding secondary school assistant principal professional development.

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted that included all required investigator information. The application included a brief review of pertinent literature, a copy of the informed consent form, signed by all participants, an outline of the setting in which the research and data collection took place, a comprehensive description of the methods and procedures for the study including a statement of significance and objectives for the study, a description of the participant population, focus group question protocols, samples of the data collection tools used in the focus groups, the survey instrument, an assessment of the risks and benefits of the study, and a statement reviewing assurances of confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data Sources

Three specific sources of data were used in this study. The audio tapes of the two focus groups with experienced principal participants were transcribed, member checked, and finalized. Those transcripts combined with the researcher field notes from those two focus groups make up the first data source used. The audio tapes of the two focus groups with entry-year assistant principal participants were transcribed, member checked, and finalized. Those transcripts combined with the researcher field notes from those two focus groups make up the second data source used. The third source of data used in this study was generated by a survey sent to all members of each initial participant candidate pool. Following the data collection and coding from the four focus groups, the themes and descriptions generated by the data analysis were incorporated into a survey instrument. The survey was then distributed, and responses to the survey were collected by the researcher for the purpose of verifying or corroborating the results with a larger sample.

Instruments

The focus group interview tools were researcher created and were driven by a thorough review of literature. The focus group questions were directed at examining and documenting the individual experiences of each participant related to their personal experiences. The researcher designed two parallel focus group question protocol documents. The first was designed for the experienced principals in focus groups A and B (Appendix G). The questions in the experienced principal focus group question protocol explored the experiences of the participants regarding both their own experience

and the experiences of entry-year assistant principals under their supervision. The second protocol was designed for the entry-year assistant principals in focus groups C and D (Appendix H). The questions in the entry-year assistant principal focus group question protocol explored their own experiences throughout the entry-year.

Focus Group Interview Protocols

The study of how assistant principals acquire the skills necessary to advance to the principal role required an understanding of the learning processes that are at work with adult professionals. To examine the professional growth of assistant principals required looking at them as adult learners through the theoretical frameworks provided by Malcolm Knowles' *Theory of Andragogy* (1970), and David Kolb's *Theory of Experiential Learning* (1984). Aspects of these foundational theories provided the framework for the questions intended to explore the specific job-embedded experiences that offered the greatest opportunity for professional learning. Knowles (1970) stated that as a person matures, they compile a collection of life experiences that ultimately become a resource for future learning, and as such, this future learning is enhanced when a learner has accumulated a larger and wider range of experiences. In effect, a learner is able to improve subsequent outcomes based upon the number of trials in their experience (Knowles, 1980).

The questions in the focus interview tools were divided into three separate sections with each section examining a different aspect of the research questions. While the structure of the focus group processes were identical, separate focus group interview protocols were developed to address the characteristics of the different participant groups.

As a control mechanism, to build rapport and a comfort level and to examine any difference in perspectives that may emerge, both experienced principal subjects and entry-year assistant principal subjects were asked the same set of questions in section one and section three of the interview tool. A foundational concept in qualitative research is the fact that when gathering data about an individual's experience, the data that are gathered are anchored to context (Mohajan, 2018). Researcher awareness to the contextual aspects of the data collected for this study can help add detail to the information contained in subject responses.

Experienced Principals

The focus group interview protocol for experienced principals incorporated the use of 12 specific researcher-authored questions designed to explore the professional development of entry-year assistant principals.

The questions in section one were designed to explore the contextual differences between each individual participant's personal experience with their career path, their influences in regards to choosing to pursue a leadership role, and their individual experiences with formal, post-graduate coursework that resulted in principal licensure.

Section one incorporated the use of the following questions:

- Describe the professional path you took to become a secondary school principal.
- Can you identify a motivating factor or an individual person in your life that influenced you to pursue becoming a secondary school principal? Can you describe that factor or person?
- You each completed the graduate coursework for principal licensure. What parts of that program prepared you well for the realities of the principal role? What parts did not?

The second section of focus group questions were directed at the defining of experiences that the participants identified as critical to the personal and professional development of entry-year secondary school assistant principals as they prepared to advance to the secondary school principal role. Learning and professional development are accelerated and most impactful when they occur in the context of real-world experience (Kolb, 1984). In section two, the questions to be used for Focus Groups A and B were structured for experienced principals to reflect on both their own personal experiences as entry-year administrators and then asked them to reflect on the experiences of entry-year assistant principals that they have mentored or supervised.

The questions in section two were directed at the primary research purpose of identifying the specific job-embedded experiences that entry-year assistant principals encountered. This section of questions began with a question about what subjects felt are the primary work responsibilities of an assistant principal and explored their perceived level of preparedness for the role. The section concluded with a question regarding whether the professional growth experiences identified by the participants as critical experiences were part of their specifically assigned daily work tasks or whether they were spontaneously occurring experiences. This information assisted in framing the daily responsibilities of each assistant principal and identifying whether identified high value workplace experiences fall within the day-to-day job responsibilities of each assistant principal or whether the identified high value experiences represent *out of the ordinary* events. This analysis assisted in the attempt to generalize conclusions by assuring comparable workplace situations regarding the assignment of responsibilities for each assistant principal participant and expanded the perspective of the participants to provide

contextual detail to their descriptions. The added contextual detail assisted the researcher in the development of rich descriptions of the participant experiences.

Section two of the focus group question protocol for the experienced principal focus groups A and B incorporated the use of the following questions:

Critical Experiences-Self

- What do you perceive to be the most important responsibility of a secondary school principal?
- In your preparation for the principal role, do you believe that your training, both formally and informally, prepared you for those “most important responsibilities”?
- Tell me a little about critical “on-the-job experiences” that you encountered in your first year in administration and how those experiences assisted in your preparation for the principal role.
- Of the “on-the-job experiences” that we just talked about, can you identify any that you consider the most critical in terms of your own professional development?

Critical Experiences-Entry-Year Assistant Principals

- Reflecting on the experiences that an entry-year assistant principal encounters during their first year, can you identify any experiences that you consider the most valuable in regard to their professional growth?
- Can you tell me a little about each experience and why you identify it as most valuable?
- Were these experiences that you described the result of a specifically assigned task, or was each one a naturally occurring, spontaneous event that they faced in the performance of their duties?

The final section of the focus group questions was used to collect data about the perspectives of research study participants regarding how the experiences of entry-year secondary assistant principals may be influenced by their school district setting as identified by the urban, suburban, rural, and Appalachian classification. Are there

specific challenges or advantages to the professional growth of entry-year assistant principals based upon the typology of the school district in which they worked?

Section three of the focus group question protocol for the experienced principals incorporated the use of the following questions:

- In regard to the professional development of school leaders, what unique advantages are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?
- In regard to the professional development of school leaders, what unique challenges are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?

When the experienced principal focus group interviews were completed, the responses were transcribed. After transcription, the record of each focus group was sent via email to each individual participant in the focus group for the purpose of member checking to assure that the transcriptions accurately captured the responses and intentions of each participant. Following the member checking, the transcripts were returned to the researcher via email with an affirmation from each participant that they were an accurate record of the comments and descriptions provided.

Entry-Year Assistant Principals

The focus group interview protocol for entry-year assistant principals incorporated the use of 12 specific researcher-authored questions designed to explore the professional development of entry-year assistant principals.

The questions in section one were designed to explore the contextual differences between each individual participant's personal experience with career path, their influences in regard to choosing to pursue a leadership role, and their individual experiences with formal, post graduate coursework that resulted in principal licensure.

Section one incorporated the use of the following questions:

- Describe the professional path you took to become a secondary school assistant principal.
- Can you identify a motivating factor or an individual person in your life that influenced you to pursue becoming a secondary school assistant principal? Can you describe that factor or person?
- You each completed the graduate coursework for principal licensure. What parts of that program prepared you well for the realities of the principal role? What parts did not?

The second section of the focus group question protocol is directed at the defining of experiences that the participants identified as critical to the personal and professional development of entry-year secondary school assistant principals as they prepare to advance to the secondary school principal role. In section two, the questions used for Focus Groups C and D were structured for entry-year assistant principals.

The questions in section two were directed at the primary research purpose of identifying the specific job-embedded experiences that entry-year assistant principals encounter. This section of questions began with a question about what participants felt are the primary work responsibilities of a principal and explored their perceived level of preparedness for the role.

In terms of adult learning theory, Kolb (1984) proposed a model wherein learner experience is followed by a process of reflection. The reflection that follows an experience leads a learner to develop personal conclusions about the experience, and it is through these drawn conclusions that a learner is able to competently and actively experiment within subsequent experiences to improve subsequent outcomes (Kolb, 1984). The questions in section two focused on this concept.

The section concluded with a question regarding whether the professional growth experiences identified by the participants as critical experiences were part of their specifically assigned daily work tasks, or whether they were spontaneously occurring experiences. This information assisted in framing the daily responsibilities of each assistant principal and highlighting whether identified high value workplace experiences fall within the day-to-day job responsibilities of each assistant principal or whether the identified high value experiences represent “out of the ordinary” events. This analysis assisted in the attempt to generalize conclusions by assuring comparable workplace situations regarding the assignment of responsibilities for each assistant principal participant and expanded the perspective of the participants to provide contextual detail to their descriptions. The added contextual detail assisted the researcher in the development of rich descriptions of the participant experiences.

Section two of the focus group question protocol for the entry-year principals focus groups C and D, incorporated the use of the following questions:

Critical Experiences-Self

- What do you perceive to be the most important responsibility of a secondary school principal?
- In your preparation for the principal role, do you believe that your training, both formally and informally, is preparing you for those “most important daily responsibilities”?
- Do you have a mentor or more experienced administrator upon who you rely for guidance? Who is that person?
- Tell me a little about “on the job experiences” that you encountered in your first year in the assistant principal role and how you believe those experiences assist in your preparation for the principal role.

- Of the “on the job experiences” that we just talked about, can you identify any that you consider the most critical in terms of your own personal or professional development?
- Can you tell me a little about each experience and why you identify it as most valuable?
- Were these experiences that you described the result of a specifically assigned task, or was each one a naturally occurring, spontaneous event that you faced in the performance of your duties?

The final section of the focus group questions was used to collect data about the perspectives of research study participants regarding how the experiences of entry-year secondary assistant principals may have been influenced by their school district setting as identified by the urban, suburban, rural, and Appalachian classification. Are there specific challenges or advantages to the professional growth of entry-year assistant principals based upon the typology of the school district in which they worked?

Section three of the focus group questions for the experienced principals incorporated the use of the following questions:

- In regard to the professional development of school leaders, what unique advantages are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?
- In regard to the professional development of school leaders, what unique challenges are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?

When all entry-year assistant principal focus group interviews were completed, the responses were transcribed. After transcription, the record of each focus group was sent via email to each individual participant in the focus group for the purpose of member checking to assure that the transcriptions accurately captured the responses and intentions of each participant. Following the member checking, the transcripts were returned to the

researcher via email with an affirmation from each participant that they were an accurate record of the comments and descriptions provided.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was created using the Survey Monkey on-line tool (Appendix I). The survey instrument was sent via email to all 78 experienced secondary school principals in participant candidate pools A and B. The survey instrument was also sent via email to all 51 entry-year secondary school assistant principals in participant candidate pools C and D. Each recipient was informed that all responses to the survey were used for data analysis purposes and that no identifiable personal data would be used. Recipients of the survey instrument were then asked to complete the survey.

The survey instrument provided a brief description of the research purpose and research questions, followed by an explanation of how the data were gathered. The survey also requested that, if each recipient was comfortable doing so, that they provide their race and gender. It was explained that these two demographic items would be incorporated anonymously and used as an additional data point. Below that opening paragraph, the survey provided each research question followed by the thick, comprehensive descriptions authored by the researcher with the data from the focus groups. Those descriptions were followed by a Likert scale displaying a scale of 1 (*Do Not Agree*) through 5 (*Completely Agree*).

Data Collection Process

The goal of the research design was to attain research data saturation from the participant descriptions. For the purposes of this study, four separate focus groups were seated, and interviewed. Each focus group contained five participants.

The use of the focus group was chosen for this study in that it provided a limited role for the researcher during data collection and maximized participation by the subjects. Ultimately, the researcher sought to minimize structure that might stifle authentic participation and expand the depth of conversation, keeping the focus on the research questions.

This study used the focus group format to gather data regarding the acquisition of leadership skills and professional development of school building principals. As described in chapter II, the conceptual framework of this study employed the concept of andragogy, or adult learning theory, to anchor the descriptions of job-embedded, critical workplace experiences identified by experienced secondary school principals and entry-year secondary assistant principals as critical adult learning opportunities.

The primary data collection occurred during a face-to-face focus group interview with each of the four identified research groups.

- Focus Group A-Experienced Principals (Urban and Suburban)
- Focus Group B-Experienced Principals (Rural and Appalachian)
- Focus Group C-Assistant Principals (Urban and Suburban)
- Focus Group D-Assistant Principals (Rural and Appalachian)

Throughout the research process, the welfare of the research participants was a priority. Prior to the scheduled focus group date, each participant was provided an emailed copy of an informed consent document (Appendix C). This informed consent document outlined the purpose of the study, structure, and procedures of the focus group, the benefits of the research, and a statement assuring participants of confidentiality regarding any personally identifiable data collected. The informed consent document

also included the contact information for the researcher, a statement acknowledging the voluntary nature of the participant's participation in the study including their ability to withdraw from the focus group at any time, and a statement that each participant was required to sign affirming their consent to participate in the research study. Participants were directed to print the informed consent document, review and sign it, and bring a signed copy with them to their scheduled focus group time.

The focus groups were conducted face-to-face in a conference room that accommodates 10 people in the offices of the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators in Columbus, Ohio. The conference room has 10 chairs around a rectangular conference table (Appendix D). The researcher and materials were set up at one end of the table prior to the arrival of the five focus group participants. Each participant was permitted to select any open seat and make themselves comfortable. Refreshments were available on an adjacent table throughout the focus group time. After each participant was seated, the researcher confirmed their receipt of the informed consent document, offered them an opportunity for any questions regarding the form, and collected the signed copy of the document. After receipt of the informed consent document, the researcher provided each participant with a short demographic questionnaire to collect additional data (Appendix E). That questionnaire asked each participant to list:

- Name
- Age
- Gender
- Marital Status

- School
- Number of years in their current role
- Number of years in school administration
- Number of years employed in education

The questionnaire also included space for the researcher to identify the participant's location at the table and a place for the researcher to assign each participant a random participant number to assist in identification by the researcher and provide anonymity in the transcription and coding process. After each participant completed the form, it was collected, completed by the researcher, and set aside.

The focus group incorporate open-ended questions, and 90 minutes was allotted for each focus group. Given the professional responsibilities of each participant, care was given to respect the scheduled starting and ending times for each focus group. Only the researcher and participants were present for each focus group.

At the scheduled start of the focus group, the researcher introduced himself and informed the participants of the intended ending time. The researcher then explained the purpose of the study, the structure and procedures to be used for the focus group, the anticipated benefits of the research, and reiterated the statement from the informed consent document, assuring participants of confidentiality regarding any personally identifiable data collected during the study. The researcher then read a brief description of andragogy and adult learning theory (Appendix F). The researcher shared that an audio recording was being made of each focus group for the purpose of accurately transcribing the responses of the participants. The researcher shared that he was also

keeping field notes during the focus group. The recording device was turned on and the focus group began.

The focus group began with the researcher providing each participant an opportunity to introduce themselves, share their professional background, and identify their current professional position. The introductions were the first step in the focus group and were designed to provide a level of comfort to the subjects. The focus group interview then proceeded with the researcher asking scripted questions and allowing spontaneous response from subjects. There was no set rotation or turn-taking, allowing for any participant who wished to reply to specific questions the ability and freedom to do so. The researcher did not move on to the next question until either, each participant had an opportunity to contribute, or the topic was exhausted. This data saturation point was determined by the researcher and was defined as the point when participant responses yielded no new, or additionally relevant feedback (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Josselson, McAdams, and Liebich (2003) reinforced the idea that data saturation is achieved when feedback from the participants becomes redundant; however, they provided caution for researchers to be aware that frequently, it is the researcher who becomes saturated and recommend collecting enough data to accurately represent the participant feedback without generating a set of raw data that are so voluminous that it becomes overwhelming. The four focus groups, with each group containing five participants, provided adequate data from each group that clear themes may emerge without the danger of excessively large focus groups where data became overwhelming. Extension questions were asked by the researcher only to clarify responses. At the conclusion of the focus group, each participant was thanked for their participation. The

researcher then informed the participants that the next step was the transcription of the audio recordings made during the focus group. The researcher stressed the importance that the transcripts accurately reflect the responses of the participants and explained that, after the transcription process was complete, each participant would receive via email, a written copy of their responses. The researcher asked each participant to reply via email to acknowledge receipt of the transcript and provide any corrections or clarifications to any of their responses contained in the transcripts. The researcher also asked each participant to assist with research study confidentiality by deleting the transcript after their review and response. This use of member checking ensured that the collected data were accurate and assisted in addressing validity concerns.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data generated through qualitative research relies on the researcher's ability to make meaning out of, or interpret, the complex descriptions of a specific human phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is founded in the premise that a participant's experience is ever changing, and it is incumbent on the researcher to synthesize a description from the data collected. In the case of this study, the experiences of entry-year secondary assistant principals were explored with the understanding that there can be great variance in what each subject considers an impactful experience. This required that a researcher starts with a set of steps to add some structure to the data analysis portion of the study. The analysis of data collected through focus groups in this phenomenological research study followed the steps laid out in the phenomenology data analysis model published by Colaizzi (1978). Colaizzi's model was designed to permit researchers to highlight conceptual patterns in participant

response. After the conclusion of the focus group interviews, the audio recordings of the participant responses were transcribed and prior to proceeding, those transcripts were subjected to member checking to assure that the responses recorded and transcribed were accurate. After confirmation that the data were an accurate reflection of the participant responses, the researcher began a systematic analysis of the transcripts and research notes along the following steps:

1. Following the member checking step of the focus group transcripts, the researcher reviewed all of the transcripts and anecdotal research field notes at least twice to ensure a thorough understanding of the collected data. This slow, methodical read and reread of the data allowed the researcher to reflect on each participant and their individual responses to the focus group questions
2. The researcher then thoroughly reviewed the transcripts and identified the specific participant responses that directly related to the phenomenon being studied. Those responses were isolated in the text for coding. It may be observed that some portions of the transcript provided details and/or responses that are digressions and wander from the actual question posed. After further rereads and reflection, if portions are determined by the researcher to be superfluous, those statements could serve to confound data analysis and were subsequently discarded.
3. The researcher then reread the responses specifically identified as directly related to the phenomenon and developed an interpretive meaning for each response. The researcher looked for meanings hidden in the responses.

4. The researcher then sorted and organized those identified interpretive meanings into thematic clusters. This step was accomplished manually with the researcher reviewing hard copies of the transcripts and field notes. The researcher used color coding to identify similar themes. As these thematic clusters came together, the researcher was able to see strong common themes emerge from the collected participant responses. This process of clustering assisted the researcher in avoiding repetitive themes, identifying outlier responses, and provided the researcher with validation. This step in the process allowed truly common themes in participant responses to emerge.
5. The researcher then thoroughly examined the clusters of participant responses in order to develop a comprehensive and rich description of each theme. These descriptions are a researcher-authored synthesis of the identified participant responses around the central themes.
6. These thick, comprehensive descriptions authored by the researcher as a result of analysis of the thematic clusters were recorded as a research result.
7. The researcher then developed a survey tool designed to provide triangulation in the data analysis and confirm the trustworthiness of the identified themes and descriptions that were developed from the focus group data. The survey tool included a brief description of the research study structure and listed the research questions. The survey tool also gathered demographic data regarding race and gender. The survey tool then listed the themes and descriptions developed from the research data and asked the survey recipient to respond to each item on a five level Likert scale indicating the level to which they agree

or disagree with the identified description in response to the research questions. The survey was sent to all potential research study candidates in pools A, B, C, and D. Expanding the number of subjects offered an opportunity to participate in the survey beyond the 20 focus group participants provided a larger sample upon which research data results were confirmed. This larger sample offered confirmation of the generalizability of the findings.

8. The final draft of the research study findings was then developed and applied to the identified research questions.

The data analysis constituted the following phases: data organization, re-familiarization with the data, coding, interpretation, and writing the findings (Merriam, 2009).

Data Coding

The researcher used both open and axial coding for data analysis of the focus group data. Open and axial coding are foundational parts of grounded theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In open coding, the researcher attempted, through an analysis of a participant's description of an experienced phenomena, to name or categorize the description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Axial coding usually follows the open coding in that the researcher attempted to cluster or categorize the codes produced during open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Audio recordings and field notes were used to collect data during the focus group interviews. Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and subjected to member checking to ensure accuracy. Open coding was then used in the analysis of the transcripts. The researcher used colored highlighters and coded each

transcript individually, identifying similar themes and concepts with a specific color. The researcher used the field notes to supplement the transcripts with additional anecdotal data. The researcher first noted statements that directly related to the research purpose and questions, and then through a process of exhaustively reading each participant response, expanded the identification of relevant information contained in the data. After the conclusion of the open coding process, axial coding was used to identify thematic clusters and ultimately common themes. These themes were then recorded by the researcher.

Data Storage

All data collected throughout this study including rosters of participant candidate pools, rosters of research study participants, demographic information sheets collected at the focus group sessions, written field notes, audio recordings and transcripts developed from those recordings were stored in a locked personal location. Any documentation or anecdotal notes developed during the processes associated with this research study were destroyed at the conclusion of the study. All digital files and copies of the above listed documentation and data were stored in a password protected hard drive only accessible by the researcher. All procedures and requirements for data storage and records retention are aligned with Youngstown State University policy.

Trustworthiness

As with any type of research study, especially qualitative phenomenological research, there exists challenges to the reliability and validity of the conclusions.

Research study reliability is addressed through a complete description of the data analysis model used. This study incorporated the use of the Colaizzi (1978) model for

phenomenological research data analysis. The extensive descriptions of the process, specifically the description of the protocols and researcher designed data collection tools, and the step-by-step process for the member checking and coding of gathered data, provided future researchers the ability to understand the origin of the identified thematic clusters and themes identified in participant responses. These descriptions permit the replication of the study and address reliability concerns.

Construct validity can be of particular concern with focus group research. Taking the time to adequately define the specific characteristics of the participants, the sampling method used, the setting for the focus groups, and the protocols incorporated in the focus group questioning, address construct validity.

Internal validity is a primary concern for researchers when a research study is designed to explain how one experience or event leads to another (Yin, 2014). The purpose of this study was to identify high value, job-embedded, professional growth experiences that assistant principals experience that results in critical skill acquisition and raises the probability that they successfully advance to a principal position. The research questions were explored from both the perspective of the entry-year assistant principal experiencing them as well as from the perspective of experienced principals, reflecting on their own professional advancement and the growth of assistant principals that they have supervised in their careers. The nature of professional development and advancement for school building administrators can be a very situational phenomenon. Any number of circumstances can dictate professional advancement. The sampling procedure used in this study was designed to select participants that are a representative sample of experienced principals and entry-year assistant principals. The extensive contact with the

participants throughout the data collection phase of the study, as well as the time spent during the focus groups, and member checking steps, served to provide the researcher with a confidence regarding an accurate description of the participant generated data. These steps also provided a level of confidence that data accurately reflected the intended meaning of the participants regarding the themes identified in the findings.

External validity directly relates to the ability of a researcher to generalize conclusions from the study. This study incorporated exhaustive descriptions of participant experience and a comprehensive description of the setting used for data collection. These comprehensive descriptions of settings and participants permit transferability of the findings to similar settings and participants. The use of four separate, five-member focus groups with the research participants selected from all identified school district settings across the continuum of public school districts within the State of Ohio addressed many of the external validity concerns.

Participant Involvement

The participants involved in this study were drawn from secondary school administrators involved in the 2018 BAMA program. By their involvement in the program, each one has demonstrated a commitment to the development of school leaders, either in the role of a mentor to entry-year secondary school administrators, or in the role of the entry-year secondary school administrator interested in their own professional growth and success. The participants chosen for this study did so voluntarily without compensation or incentive. They were provided with the purpose of the study and a brief description of the structure. The trustworthiness of qualitative research is one of the significant factors in assessing the quality, validity, and reliability of the findings. An

examination of the characteristics of the chosen research subjects outlined in the participants section of this chapter, along with their motivation to volunteer for the study, reinforced the trustworthiness of the research participant sample chosen.

Triangulation

When using qualitative research study designs, a researcher is ultimately drawing conclusions based upon the data that are collected or proposing answers to research questions (Yin, 2014). Studies that use multiple sources of data are considered to be of a higher quality than those that draw conclusions based upon a single set of data (Yin, 2014). Research conclusions derived from multiple sources of evidence converging at an intersecting point is called triangulation (Yardley, 2009). In qualitative research, triangulation often requires that a researcher modify other forms of data collection to facilitate a process that makes triangulation evident (Yin, 2014).

This study used the focus group, with purposely designed questions to collect four sets of data. The design used four separate focus groups with subjects chosen specifically because they represent a sample of individuals with shared characteristics. The variance in those characteristics between groups facilitated distinct sources for data collection. After member checking to ensure accuracy, the data were analyzed and coded. From this coding, thematic clusters emerged and were then refined and recorded. An additional set of data was gathered through the use of a survey tool, sent to a larger set of participants. That survey tool was used to confirm or dismiss the themes developed from the focus group data and explore any impact of race and/or gender. Triangulation uses multiple sources of data and an analysis of where the findings from those sets of data intersect (Yin, 2014). The themes and descriptions developed by the researcher from the focus

group data and corroborated by the survey participants make the conclusions of this study more convincing and accurate.

Member Checking

One of the major dangers in qualitative research is the fact that the researcher is also the individual responsible for data collection and data analysis. Research has demonstrated that there exists a tendency in qualitative research for the researcher to influence the documentation of data collection and supplanting his own beliefs and conclusions for those of the research subjects (Birt et al., 2016; Doyle, 2007; Mason, 2002).

To confirm the accuracy of the data collection and subsequently the results of this study, at the conclusion of data collection, the completed transcripts of the focus group responses were returned to each focus group participant. Each participant was then asked to read and confirm the accuracy of the transcript to ensure that it captured not only their words but their intent as well. The participants were asked to respond to the researcher with an affirmation that the transcripts were accurate, or respond with a statement that may include corrections, clarifications, and additions. These steps were intended to make certain that the researcher did not impose his own biases or views in the data.

Contextual Completeness

The results and conclusions drawn from qualitative research are difficult to generalize because all of the aspects of phenomenological research are context dependent (Mohajan, 2018). The phenomena being studied are subjective by nature, requiring that the study of human experience incorporate an open-ended approach to the questioning process used for data collection (Creswell, 2014). Trustworthiness of the study required

an awareness to the contextual nature of the data gathered. This awareness was addressed through the inclusion of rich, detailed descriptions of the participants, sampling procedures, research protocols, data collection instruments, descriptions of the research setting, and a comprehensive description of the processes used for data analysis.

Chain of Evidence

The reliability of qualitative research is positively impacted when a researcher maintains and documents a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014). The chain of evidence refers to a researcher documenting all aspects of the study, including protocols, documents, and data collected from the initial statement of the research questions through the conclusions drawn by the researcher at the end of the study (Yin, 2014). The goal for the maintenance of a chain of evidence is for the researcher to facilitate any outside observer to read the research study and be able to trace the same steps followed by the researcher (Yin, 2014). The methodology outlined in this chapter was descriptive and complete, outlining specific steps involved in the data analysis. The described protocols and documents attached in the appendix section provide artifacts that illustrate a chain of evidence and facilitate the ability of any outside reader to follow the steps from research question through the findings. Yin (2014) stated that this detailed chain of evidence also heightens the construct validity and strengthens the study and its findings. The chain of evidence for this study is clearly observable in the comprehensive description of the participants and sampling processes, the step-by-step data analysis model used for the review of the focus group transcripts and the artifacts included in the Appendix section. Specifically, the informed consent document, the focus group question protocols, and the

focus group questions will facilitate any future researcher to follow the chain of evidence and replicate the study.

Ethics

A researcher must be keenly aware of the preconceived ideas or perspectives that they bring into the research study process (Yin, 2014). It is the responsibility of every researcher to adhere to the highest standards of research study ethics including the development and maintenance of professional competency regarding the research topic, a pursuit of accuracy in all aspects of data collection and reporting, the maintenance of promises of confidentiality for subjects, and an open admission of limitations in the findings (Yin, 2014). The literature review in Chapter II of this study demonstrated a comprehensive picture of the researcher's pursuit of competence on the research topic. The research protocols including the member checking steps assured the accuracy of the focus group data. The informed consent document provided to participants guaranteed confidentiality for any personally identifiable information in the data. Finally, the following sub-heading entitled "Researcher Stance" summarizes the personal background, perspectives, and potential limitations of the researcher.

Researcher Stance

An important component in qualitative research is the acknowledgement that the researcher brings a set of preconceived perspectives and bias into the research setting and processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study examined the critical job-embedded experiences that secondary school assistant principals encounter during their entry-year that yield the highest level of professional growth as they prepare for advancement to the principal role.

I began my post-secondary education pursuing an undergraduate degree in Psychology, with specific interest in school psychology. I had the unique opportunity to begin working in the field of education, employed fulltime in the special education classroom in inner city Cleveland, Ohio while concurrently pursuing my undergraduate degree. It became evident to me at the time that experiences obtained in the school setting held particular value for my professional and personal development. After completing my undergraduate degree, I completed a Master of Education Program at Kent State University, securing my teaching certification in the Education of the Handicapped K-12 with a specialization for Behaviorally Handicapped students and subsequently taught and coached athletics for 12 years.

I have always sought out leadership roles. As a teacher, I worked with building and district leadership on a number of projects. Those leadership experiences led me to enroll in a master's degree program seeking principal certification. Shortly after finishing my program, I was selected by a suburban district as a high school assistant principal. I was in that role for three years when I was offered a position with the same district as a middle school principal, recognizing the middle school as an excellent preparatory experience for a high school principal position.

In 2003 I was selected as the principal of a large suburban public high school. I was in that position for three years when I was recruited by the superintendent of another school district to be their high school principal. I took that opportunity. I served as the high school principal in that district until my retirement in early 2017. In those years, I completed my superintendent licensure and am currently completing my doctoral studies at Youngstown State University.

I strongly subscribe to the idea that formal education and intellectual pursuits are paramount to growth and reinforced the idea on a continual basis. As a principal, I placed a high value on the concept of professional mentoring within the field of education. One of my strongest professional memories comes from the night before my first day in the classroom. As I prepared my materials for the first day of school, I sat with my mother at the dining room table. I remember telling her that I was a little nervous because I really had no idea what I was doing. She gave me this piece of advice. “When you get to work, find someone who is really good at what they do . . . then, do what they do.” I remember responding with the question, “How will I know who is good at what they do?” “That”, she said, “is what you are responsible for figuring out.” That conversation has stuck with me since that evening and has formed the backbone of my investment in the development of not only my leadership skills, but those around me.

Education is a field rich in professional development programs and opportunities. Administrators new to the leadership role have a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional training opportunities available to them. There are formalized succession programs in place in larger districts, multi-day professional development experiences available from organizations and authors, and local *sit and get* seminars designed to teach the skills of an effective school leader. There are some quality opportunities out there, but it is my assertion that there is not a more powerful tool for the professional development of an entry-year administrator than a quality principal who provides ongoing, sustained, daily modeling and guidance embedded in the workplace. I believe that one of the most influential factors in the professional development of an administrator is the quality of, and purposeful leadership by, a positive, experienced

leader. I believe that one of the most important responsibilities that an educational leader has is their purposeful dedication to developing those within their circle of influence, specifically the entry-year assistant principal. I also believe that post-graduate education needs to incorporate more field work in professional development and principal licensure programs as classroom-based lecture and typical activities fall short of developing authentic adult learning experiences.

During my years in the secondary principal role, I had 13 assistant principals assigned under my leadership. When I retired from the principalship, the first 11 had all made the successful transition to principal positions across northeast Ohio, with the most recent two assistant principals on track to advance in the near future. I share these statistics because it is an area of personal bias as I research the preparation of secondary assistant principals because I believe that I have personal opinions regarding how it is done most effectively.

In early 2017, I was hired as the Associate Executive Director of the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators. This role requires daily interaction with secondary administrators across the State of Ohio and immerses me in a significant number of professional development activities for secondary school administrators.

My research is in the area of leadership development of secondary school assistant principals in preparation for the principal role. Reflecting on issues that have the potential to influence the findings of my study I have made several observations. First, I have some very strong opinions regarding the responsibility of a secondary principal to assign to their assistant principals what I believe are critical professional development experiences. Second, as I examined the pools of participants for my study, I

needed to have a high level of awareness regarding my familiarity with secondary school assistant principals and principals throughout Ohio and their familiarity with me. This awareness is crucial as I lead the focus groups, code the data, and draw conclusions. Third, throughout my career, I have presented at the local and state level on assistant principal professional development. I need to be aware of any projection of my perspectives and biases onto the responses of participants who have heard me speak. Finally, I must be aware of my concerns regarding post-graduate coursework involved in principal preparation. Given what I know about adult learning theory and my belief that there needs to be a significant increase in field work, I know that there is a great deal of variance in the structure and requirements in principal licensure programs within the university setting. I need to be sensitive to this bias in myself. I need to ensure that I do not inadvertently influence data collected through questions that diminish the collegiate preparation of participants as I explore their job embedded experiences.

I have long described my career in education as a *way of life*, or a *vocation*, as opposed to a *job*. I am very aware that while others become effective in the role, I have a unique approach when it comes to work ethic and what I feel are critical skills for a building principal. My personal perspective on how the job should be done has almost always served me well, not only in my own performance, but also in the way that I have taught those under my direction. They have grown, developed, and subsequently been chosen to be a principal themselves. I need to be aware that my own perspective on the path to success is just that, my own perspective.

Summary

This study used the qualitative phenomenological methodology of the focus group in an attempt to investigate and describe the specific pivotal job-embedded professional experiences of secondary school assistant principals that facilitated personal and professional growth in their preparation for advancement to the principal position in the selected participant sample. The sample provided for the perspectives of both entry-year secondary school assistant principals and experienced principals. The findings of the focus groups were incorporated into a survey instrument, distributed to a larger sample of entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals, with the goal of strengthening the results and conclusions. The thorough description of the participant characteristics and sampling procedures, the description of the focus group interview questions and processes, the use of member checking, and an outlining of the data analysis steps assisted the researcher in the development of thick descriptions of the participants' experiences related to professional development. The comprehensive review of literature established the foundation and urgency for seeking answers to the research questions.

The results of this study serve to provide guidance to two distinct audiences. First, individuals in the secondary principal role are equipped with comprehensive, thick descriptions of high value job-embedded experiences that an assistant principal under their supervision should be provided as they prepare for advancement to the principal role. Second, the individuals responsible for the design and delivery of graduate school principal preparation programs, by being provided the same comprehensive, thick descriptions, may endeavor to include similar thematic experiences in an expanded field work requirement for attaining principal licensure.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this research study. This study examined the professional responsibilities and specific learning opportunities afforded secondary school assistant principals during their entry-year. The study employed the principles of andragogy and experiential learning to provide a framework for the comprehensive description and analysis of the educational experiences that both experienced secondary school principals and entry-year secondary school assistant principals identified as impactful to their professional growth in performance of their administrative responsibilities and preparation for their job as principal.

This chapter provides a brief summary of the purpose of the study, a restatement of the research questions, a description of the sample selected as research participants, a review of how the data analysis model was applied to the collected data, and finally, a presentation of the findings following data analysis.

The presentation of the research findings is organized in three separate sections. The first section presents the dominant themes that emerged from the eight separate topics addressed in the focus group interview questions as presented to experienced secondary school principal participants and entry-year secondary school assistant principals. Those eight different topics are presented as separate sub-headings. The second section specifically addresses the stated research questions and provides the thick descriptions developed by the researcher following the data analysis process in response to each of the three research questions. The final section presents the results from the

survey instrument that was employed to provide a source of triangulation of the data and corroboration to the research findings.

Research Questions

Within the conceptual framework of adult learning theory, the research questions for this study sought to identify, describe, and validate the specific experiences for the professional development of the secondary public school assistant principal.

Research Question #1

When providing narrative descriptions of their entry-year, what specific educational experiences do secondary school assistant principals identify as valuable and impactful to their preparation for advancement to the school principal position?

Research Question #2

Reflecting on their own personal entry-year experiences, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

Research Question #3

Reflecting on their professional experiences working with entry-year assistant principals, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful to current entry-year assistant principals in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

Participants

Research data were collected from both experienced secondary school principals and entry-year secondary school assistant principals. The participants selected for this study were currently licensed secondary school principals and secondary school assistant principals employed in public school districts within the State of Ohio. The sample of entry-year assistant principals was selected from a pool of entry-year assistant principals in their first year in public school administration. Experienced principals were selected from a pool of experienced public school building principals employed in the principal role for at least 5 years. All potential research study participants were vetted by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), The Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA), and the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators (OASSA) and selected as participants in the 2018 Beginning Administrator Mentorship Academy (BAMA). Within the pool of BAMA participants, criterion referenced sampling was used to identify potential research study participants. There were 42 experienced secondary school principals who met the criteria set by the researcher. There were 51 entry-year secondary school assistant principals who met the criteria set by the researcher. These research study participant candidates received an email inviting them to participate in the study. The first five candidates from each of the identified candidate pools who responded indicating their willingness to participate were selected as the sample for the study.

Experienced Principals

Two focus groups, each containing five participants, for a total number of 10 experienced secondary school principals, were interviewed according to the stated

sampling process and research study protocol. To provide a sample of secondary school principals that adequately reflected the demographic variety represented by Ohio's public school districts, five participants were from urban or suburban school districts; this group was identified as focus group A. The second focus group included five participants from rural or Appalachian school districts and was identified as focus group B.

Entry-Year Assistant Principals

Two focus groups, each containing five participants, for a total number of 10 entry-year secondary school assistant principals were interviewed according to the stated sampling process and research study protocol. To provide a sample of entry-year secondary school assistant principals that adequately reflected the demographic variety represented by Ohio's public school districts, five participants were from urban or suburban school districts; this group was identified as focus group C. Five participants were from rural or Appalachian school districts and were identified as focus group D.

Sample Size

The research study incorporated the use of four separate focus groups, with five participants in each group, providing for a total of 20 participants. Mason (2010) recommended limiting the total number of participants in this type of research study to 20 or less, citing that little new insight is gained by researchers analyzing transcribed data beyond that number. The application of the research subject criteria established four separate pools of potential research participants. Research participants were recruited from these four pools establishing four focus groups identified as Focus Groups A, B, C, and D. Table 4.1 provides the demographic composition of the four focus groups.

Table 4.1

Demographic Composition of Focus Group Participants

FOCUS GROUP	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	APPALACHIAN	MALE	FEMALE
A	3	2	0	0	3	2
B	0	0	4	1	5	0
C	2	3	0	0	2	3
D	0	0	3	2	1	4
Total Sample	5	5	7	3	11	9

Perception of District Typology Impact

The Ohio Department of Education uses a variety of descriptors when identifying Ohio’s public schools. One of those indicators is district typology. That typology may indicate whether a district is urban, suburban, rural, or Appalachian. Of the 612 traditional public school districts in the State of Ohio, approximately 61% of them are identified as either urban or suburban, with approximately 39% of them being identified as rural and Appalachian (ODE, 2019).

The establishment of the four separate groups provided a variety of school district typology and sought to represent the diversity of Ohio’s public schools. During the focus group interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the question of whether they believe that the typology of a school district impacted the professional development of school leaders.

All participants, regardless of the focus group that they belonged to, stated that they strongly believed that different types of districts provided different variables that impacted the professional development of school leaders; however, the factors by which they defined *different types of districts* was not linked to the Ohio Department of

Education classification of a district as urban, suburban, rural, or Appalachian.

Participants often linked the variables that impacted the professional development of school leaders as socio-economic and socio-political, as opposed to the criteria incorporated in the urban, suburban, rural, and Appalachian typology. I think it has less to do with the type of district and more to do with the socio-economics. It's definitely money related; it's all about money, not location (Participant B3). I think some of it is the same between the different types of districts, but the politics of where you are at, you need to learn all those things (Participant A1).

Findings

The researcher identified seven constructs presented to the entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals in the interview questions. In addition to the seven common constructs studied, an eighth construct, unique to assistant principals and an eighth construct presented to experienced principals were also presented in the focus group interview questions. The eighth construct explored aspects unique to entry-year secondary school assistant principals and was included to add depth to the responses to other constructs.

Each subheading begins with a brief explanation of the construct. The explanation is followed by a presentation of the thematic clusters identified in the entry-year assistant principal responses to the focus group interview questions and then a presentation of the thematic clusters identified in the experienced principal participant responses. The identified thematic clusters for each group of participants is accompanied by extracted citations from the focus group transcripts supporting the theme. After the

presentation of the thematic clusters identified in responses, a chart presents an encapsulated view of the similarities and differences between the groups.

The Path to the Principalship

The first question was designed to provide participants an opportunity to share some personal information and build rapport with each other as well as with the researcher. The question asked each individual to provide a description of the professional path that each individual took to reach their current position. The field of public education provides a relatively prescribed path to the school principalship. All participants attained teacher licensure in the State of Ohio and continued their post graduate education, completing a master's degree. All participants then completed the requirements to secure licensure as a secondary school principal. Two distinct themes emerged in an analysis of the entry-year assistant principal participant responses to this question.

Athletic roles. The first theme identified the presence of athletics in the background of participants. Involvement in athletics as an athlete, in the coaching role, and athletic direction and event management was identified as a common background experience in the sample.

I got a full ride to college to play volleyball, so I was exposed to athletics at a young age. Everyone told me that I had the talent to be a coach which meant that I was going to be a teacher. As I went through the process, I really enjoyed my time training for the teaching part more than I enjoyed coaching in the gym. But they also told me, get them to hire you as a coach and you can show them that you are a great teacher. They asked me if I wanted to be the athletic director for a half

day. I gladly did. I loved the leadership and even though athletics played a big role in my life at that time, a principal in the building asked me to pursue Ed. Leadership. (Participant D3)

The responses from five of the 10 participants indicated that the leadership associated with athletic participation as a member of a team and the management aspects of the athletic director role played a significant part in their individual career paths.

Teacher leadership roles. The second theme revealed that all participants shared experiences directly related to their assuming teacher leadership roles in their respective buildings either before or during their post-graduate principal licensure programs.

I was part of the building leadership team and had the opportunity to pick up some new roles within my school related to programs that we were starting. I went through some additional training and I found myself always in the place where I was the teacher getting involved at central office. I was like, “OK, I’ll go do it.” I liked working with all of the other teachers around the district. I was definitely becoming the go-to person in my grade and started to pick up more leadership roles. So, I chose administration and found out that it was exactly what I wanted to do. (Participant C1)

Seven of the 10 entry-year assistant principals related stories of their experiences assuming a variety of teacher leadership roles within their schools prior to finishing their licensure. Those leadership experiences facilitated exposure to administrative duties; however, almost all of the duties described were curricular. Two themes also emerged in an analysis of the experienced principal participant responses to this question.

Teacher leadership roles. The first theme identified their involvement in teacher leadership before seeking principal licensure. Seven of the 10 experienced principal participants shared a professional resume that indicated that they occupied a teacher leadership role in their respective teaching careers. I think my principal put me in teacher leadership roles on purpose. “He really started grooming me for leadership” (Participant A2). “I was able to land a job in a small Christian school. I slowly moved up and eventually did the job of the dean of students. I taught some of the day” (Participant B4). “I taught there for two years and then I was doing some summer school work with the CTC, a focus on instructional leadership” (Participant B5).

Experienced principal participants often linked their participation in teacher leadership activities to the encouragement of the building principal at the time. It should be noted that the principals who shared experiences where they were encouraged to assume leadership roles as a teacher, appeared to share that same trait as an experienced principal, embracing their responsibility to identify and encourage leadership in identified individuals on their teaching staff.

Athletic roles. A strong theme emerged in the participant responses that centered around athletics. Participants specifically identified a background in coaching and subsequent involvement in athletic direction and student activities management.

I had been coaching multiple sports and it really put me in a variety of leadership roles in the building. At that point in my life I thought that I wanted to be a career athletic director. The following fall in the building where I was a teacher, the district decided to split the athletic director and assistant principal jobs. I was encouraged to apply. (Participant A2)

The experienced principal participants described athletics as an area where they first experienced the responsibility of leadership in the school setting. The descriptions either centered around leadership traits finding a place in athletics or athletes finding a place in leadership.

Influential People or Factors

Participants were asked to identify any individual people or factors that influenced or supported their decision to pursue educational leadership and seek a principal position. In the responses of entry-year assistant principals three themes were identified.

Influential principal. The strongest theme that emerged centered around entry-year assistant participants primarily citing a principal who they considered influential in their decision to pursue principal licensure. It should be noted that their identification of a principal as influential was a result of positive as well as negative experiences with that principal.

The principal that I worked for, it was not easy, she was tough. We had many ups and downs, many battles, but she always put the kids first. If she had an idea that I questioned, I could go to her and she would talk about it. She would dialogue with me and then, I would be on board. She would always listen to disagreements. The fact that she would take the time to listen was important. I do have to say, working for her was not easy. She had very high expectations, and the growth that her kids made was pretty impressive. She was amazing; I'm glad she is still there when I need her. (Participant D4)

It should be noted that while they interacted with a number of different administrators in their professional paths, the details shared when identifying influential factors and people primarily included the principal that the entry-year assistant principals worked under when they were in their final years in the classroom.

Family members. The second theme seen in responses by five of the entry-year assistant principal participants included references to family members as motivation for advancement to a leadership role.

Both of my parents were in education, my mom was a secretary in the athletic department and my dad was a high school English teacher and football coach for as long as I can remember. My father always had every certification you could possibly have, probably because he taught for so long. He never went the administration route, but I feel like I grew up basically thinking he was an administrator. He was always at the building and everybody knew who he was. Any time an administrator was absent, my dad was filling in and helping out. I grew up at school and I knew all of the leaders. That was a big influence on me.
(Participant C1)

Athletics. Athletic participation emerged as a third theme seen in entry-year assistant principal responses. Specifically, leadership positions on their respective athletic teams were identified as an early factor that motivated participants to gravitate to leadership roles. “I would say football as I was a captain and I knew I was going to be a leader. I thought I was going to teach math and be a head football coach” (Participant D1).

The participant responses indicated a range of behaviors related to athletic involvement including assuming coaching responsibilities.

I then became a cheerleading coach. We were reorganizing how we did cheerleading across the district. Then I ended up being the head cheer coach. The middle school principal conned me into being the middle school athletic director. I thought coaching the coaches was a lot of fun. (Participant D2)

It became apparent in the analysis of the entry-year assistant principal responses that participation in athletics was a pathway to leadership. In many cases, some sort of athletic management and supervision was the gateway activity that influenced their desire to pursue principal licensure.

The question was then presented to experienced principal participants. An analysis of their responses provided three specific themes.

Influential administrator. An influential school administrator encountered in the course of their career was present in each participant's responses. The individuals identified as influential are primarily building principals; however, several participants mentioned assistant principals, supervisors, and superintendents. A number of subjects also identified an influential principal in negative terms.

When I got to that district, our principal knew that I was thinking about getting my master's degree in administration. He asked me if I was serious about it or if I was getting the degree for other reasons. I told him I was serious. He was very good to me in terms of taking time with me. He would start by giving me very menial tasks like labeling inventory, athletic scheduling, and working on the building schedule, or let me help with PD day. You would think that maybe the

principal didn't have time to do what he was assigning to me, but as the year went on, I met with him nearly every day and talked about what I was doing and my plans. He then let me sit in on meetings and whatever he had going on. That year, I really got a chance to see what administration looked like. As a teacher, you really have no idea about what's going on. I thought that I knew, but not until I got to see it. (Participant C2)

Experienced principals reflecting on influential factors also identified their building principals as major influences, but in negative terms with negative examples.

During my first year, right after our first faculty meeting, my principal entered my office and yelled at me and told me, "It doesn't matter how calm you keep your voice, if you become an administrator, they are all going to hate you by the end of the year. It created a climate where I didn't speak to my principal for the remainder of the year. The teachers refused to go to her. It was a difficult experience, but it helped me build relationships with other teachers. I learned way more from those relationships than I learned in any formal way from the mentorship of my principal. (Participant A1)

Five of the 10 participants shared similar stories where the failure of their principal to establish relationships and provide mentorship in a positive way influenced individuals to pursue a leadership role.

Family members. The second theme represented in experienced principal participant responses identified a family member as an influential factor in their decision to seek principal licensure. "My dad was always big on education. In the beginning, he was an individual who encouraged me" (Participant A4).

Experienced principals mentioned family members as influences in their desire to seek a leadership role. The descriptions of those individuals and experiences are less descriptive with experienced principals than they were with entry-year assistant principals.

Athletics. The third theme noted in experienced principal responses to the question cited personal experience in an athletic leadership role and coaching as an influential factor in their motivation to seek a principal job.

Like all young teachers, I taught, I advised, and I coached. I think I wanted to be a head coach of football and basketball. My principal, I had a great relationship with him. He had a real focus on instructional leadership. That influenced me in a positive way. I was starting out and he encouraged me, saw traits in me, made me believe I was capable of leadership. (Participant B5)

Six of the 10 experienced principals cited their initial exposure to a form of leadership in schools as athletics based. The leadership demonstrated in the field of athletics is often the starting point from which the influence of a principal or other mentor is mentioned.

Principal Licensure Program Experience

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in the post graduate principal licensure programs that they participated in. Specifically, the focus group interview question asked participants to identify specific aspects of their programs that they felt prepared them for the realities of the secondary school administrative role and also asked them to identify any aspects of their program that they felt did not prepare them.

Specific course content. In preparation for the secondary school assistant principal role, entry-year assistant principal participants cited specific topics covered in principal licensure coursework as notably impactful to their preparation. The courses identified included finance and school funding classes.

My school finance professor was an old superintendent and while I was taking the class, our district was trying to pass an income tax levy. I was doing all of my assignments for class and had the chance to work with our district treasurer. My superintendent was using the numbers that I was working on in the campaign. It was valuable because it was more than just doing the numbers; it was contributing to our district leadership team, and they were using it at board meetings.

(Participant D1)

School law was also identified as an impactful course in the licensure program. “I think the most important part of the curriculum was the school law class. We got a lot of information, and I definitely find myself reflecting on that information while doing my job” (Participant C1).

The entry-year assistant principals were reflecting on their principal licensure coursework and highlighted courses that they believed had applicability to the realities of the job beyond the licensure classroom. The examples provided in the transcripts explored the value of the Finance course, and the School Law course.

The cohort model. A dominant theme that was presented in the entry-year assistant principal participant responses was the value of the cohort model in the structure of their principal preparation programs. The interactive nature of the cohort as well as

the conversational interaction with others undergoing similar challenges stood out as key components in the theme.

There were so many different types of people involved because we were in a cohort for two years, so close, it was a powerful experience. I think the experience of being in a cohort and interacting with other professionals was the most valuable part of my preparation. My husband is doing his licensure now and he is spending his time reading and writing papers. For me, in a cohort, it was a lot more authentic, a lot more real-life, talking about real problems, it wasn't hypothetical. (Participant C5)

During the focus group interview, one entry-year assistant principal made the statement: "The value was in the cohort, not the curriculum" (Participant D3). This statement appeared to capture the theme expressed by other participants across all four focus groups.

Case studies. One of the most dominant themes that emerged from the entry-year assistant principal focus group participants during the interviews was their identification of the use of real world experiences, case studies, and scenarios in the principal preparation program coursework as a positive component of their preparation, applicable and valuable to the realities of the job.

I really enjoyed the part of my preparation program that involved the use of case studies to problem solve real-life things that happen to other administrators. Different situations, you learn how to handle them through discussion. Hearing how other people would handle them, I enjoyed that. I would definitely agree that this part of my internship was valuable. (Participant C1)

The mention of an instructional approach that incorporated the use of case studies and scenarios was present throughout the responses of focus group participants to various questions included in the focus group interview instrument.

The entry-year assistant principal participants also provided answers to the interview questions that identified aspects of their principal preparation program that they believed fell short of their expectations in regards to preparing them for the realities of the assistant principal role.

Internship experiences. Participants specifically cited the internship portion of their principal preparation program as not valuable.

The least valuable part to me when I look at my licensure program was the intern requirements. There were like 180 some odd hours of things that I had to do to check off the list. Some of the things that they made us do, I would be involved in them and think, this is not what principals do. We are so busy with other items, so many other things that equated to the job and I had to do things for my internship like watch my principal type on his computer for three hours. That's not real life. (Participant D2)

“The paperwork, the write-ups, the interviews, it didn't seem to have anything to do with what we were doing on the job as assistant principals, it just seemed extra” (Participant C1).

While analyzing the focus group transcripts, entry-year assistant principal participants often provided extended responses that eventually got around to answering the question. In the case of the responses listed above, participants were very quick and

pointed in their assertion that their internship responsibilities, completed for their licensure programs, were not viewed as positive experiences.

Entry-year assistant principals identified the experiences that they encountered on the job during their entry year as the most valuable professional development experiences to date. Participants stated that their entry-year experiences were far more valuable than any aspect of their principal licensure programs.

The thing that I discovered about my internship versus being on the job this first year is that you never really know what it's like until you are there. You don't know what you don't know. I'm very fortunate to have three assistant principals in my building and I'm learning a ton. It seems like my first year on the job is more like what I think an internship should be like, but I do not think they could ever make it just like that. (Participant C4)

Entry-year assistant principals reinforced the theme that their experiences in their first year in the assistant principal role was the most valuable portion of their professional development.

I think the big experiences are huge, but what maybe is more important than living through the experiences is the discussion and debriefing that occurs after it. That reflection is so important. The most important part of those big experiences is the intentional conversations after them, where you have a chance to reflect with your team on how things went, the decisions you made, but that's also dependent on having a great leader. (Participant D3)

The experiences shared in the focus groups highlighted the need for not only authentic experience, but the reflection and consequence only available in the workplace.

Comparisons to student teaching. Five of the entry-year assistant principal participants also made reference to their student teaching experiences completed during their undergraduate programs. Participants stated that upon completion of those programs, they left their teacher preparation programs with a level of confidence in their preparation to face the reality of teaching. Participants then stated that their post-graduate principal licensure programs did not offer the same feeling of confidence entering the assistant principalship. “When I finished my undergrad student teaching, I felt really prepared for the classroom. Maybe that has something to do with my dissatisfaction with the administrative internship” (Participant C1).

Participants described undergraduate training that prepared them to teach. When they left the teacher preparation programs, they entered classrooms and taught. Preparation and subsequent teaching were aligned. They expected their descriptions of the administrative internships would be similar to their student teaching internships. However, they were required to participate in activities and assignments that did not resemble the wide range of daily duties that they faced when they entered the assistant principal role.

Case studies. When presented with the focus group interview questions regarding preparation, the strongest theme to emerge from this topic area was the experienced principal participant’s description of the use of case studies and authentic problem-solving activities as materials in principal licensure coursework.

I really liked the classes that were taught by practitioners who were still in the field. It would be common for them to come into class and say, “this happened today, how would you handle it?” They were probably the best courses because

they were more about here is a scenario, how would you fix it, how would you deal with the problem. The theory stuff, it did not have much value to the realities of the principal's job. (Participant B2)

Seven of the 10 experienced principal participants identified the use of case studies and real-life scenarios as the most valuable preparation tool available to them in their principal preparation programs. When linked to a structure that incorporated an instructor who was also a principal practitioner and with the ability to process the case studies with peers in a cohort or group setting, participants consistently described the high value of that experience.

The cohort model. While reflecting on their principal licensure program, the second theme to come from the participant's responses was the positive impact of being part of a licensure cohort while completing their required coursework. "We were all bringing different classroom experiences into the situation so the cohort part of my program I really liked" (Participant B2).

We had a seminar structure and met for four to six hours on Saturdays for class. The ability to sit down in a cohort setting and talk about problems and what we were working on, that was valuable. The best part of the program was getting together with other people and collaborating, and discussing, and networking. We used case studies and real-world problems and had the ability to seek input from each other, not only for the program, but for our schools. It taught me something, that on big problems, I always reach out to my peers. (Participant B5)

The value of participating in a principal preparation program with a cohort, where relationships are developed, and trust is built over time with individuals going through

the same experiences, greatly enhances the value of the learning experiences available in the program. It appears, if a program uses a cohort model and pairs that structure with the use of case studies and authentic, real world scenarios to teach or reinforce critical concepts, the learning experiences are much more valuable.

Specific course content. In regards to the specific curricular offerings of their programs participants described their courses on finance and school law as impactful. “My entire program wasn’t very valuable; actually, I would say that the law class and a little bit of the finance class helped” (Participant B1).

To be honest the law class that I took was an eye opener, especially with my background in special education. The course opened my eyes to the fact that there are a lot of different ways to look at things. (Participant C3)

The experienced principal participants specifically identified areas of the principal preparation curriculum that had tangible applicability to the day-to-day work of a school administrator. The aspects of school law as it relates to due process and special education services and the aspects of school finance as it relates to building a budget were cited as important learning opportunities.

When describing aspects of their principal licensure programs that they viewed as not valuable in their preparation for the realities of the principal role, participants stated that programs did not prepare them for the socio-political aspects of the job. “New administrators struggle with seeing the big picture outside of their classrooms and building” (Participant A1). “The big thing that wasn’t touched upon during my graduate studies was how you deal with things that have nothing to do with education; you need to understand the political things as well” (Participant B4).

Experienced principal participants noted in their comments that they were not prepared for the political aspects of the school principal job, such as the interactions with community constituents and services and the importance of attention to things that were not discussed in their preparation for the position.

Participants also described a majority of their program content as theoretically based, ignoring the real-life application of leadership theory.

Some of the theorists that we studied, they may have been nice guys, but they did not have much value to the realities of the principal's job. We talked about theory, but does it really work? We used to call it the communism of education leadership; it looks good on paper but it doesn't really work. (Participant B2)

Six experienced principal participants noted that there was, in their opinion, an excess of exposure to leadership theory without the next step of connecting it to any authentic experience. Participants related the feeling of learning theory to regurgitate it for assessment, but never applying it in the field. They communicated that much of the content seemed disconnected from the realities of the job that they were facing.

Experienced principal participants also described the experience of completing principal licensure and all of the steps necessary in preparation for the curricular aspects of the principal role when, in reality their first job after securing licensure was as an assistant principal. "My graduate program was much better suited for a principal than it was for an assistant principal; the courses didn't prepare me for the assistant principal role" (Participant A3).

The literature review for this study bears out that the assistant principalship is traditionally the entry level position in secondary school administration. Participants

related very little experience in their principal preparation programs that dealt with the assistant principal role. There was a level of frustration with the fact that the career path for many principals runs through the assistant principal office, yet their licensure programs were primarily directed at the curricular leadership responsibilities of the principal position.

Comparisons to student teaching. Similar to the experiences shared by entry-year assistant principal participants, three experienced principal participants also described feeling very prepared to teach upon completion of their student teaching experiences, but not feeling the same level of confidence or preparedness after completing their principal licensure field experiences and practicums. “I really enjoyed teaching, I was really ready; but as far as preparation for the principal role, I think the best training was really learning when I got there” (Participant B3).

Primary Responsibilities

The entry-year secondary school assistant principals were asked to identify at this point what they felt was their most important daily responsibility.

Role ambiguity. The predominant theme that emerged in the responses of the participants centered around what they described as a lack of clarity for responsibilities. There was not a shortage of examples for the types of responsibilities that they faced, but participants struggled to identify a most important responsibility.

I’m thinking about that part that you read at the start of the focus group, that an assistant principal does over 140 different jobs and the thing that I discovered is that you never know what it’s like until you are there. (Participant C1)

Building relationships. The only consistent theme identified by the entry-year assistant principal participants was their responsibility to build trusting relationships with the constituents that they worked with each day.

My number one daily responsibility is supposed to be student discipline, but at this point I realize that it is really building relationships. Being visible, interacting with people, dealing with some of our toughest kids, it really becomes about coaching people and getting them through. The socio-emotional piece keeps coming back as my most important job right now. (Participant C5)

As the entry-year assistant principals began to answer this focus group question, they fumbled around a bit, trying to define their role. Five of them eventually began to describe relationship building as an intersectional skill that affected so many of their other responsibilities. They cited big events that facilitated learning, but a few of them identified the relationship building skills as a foundational part of their success.

Experienced principals were also asked to identify what they felt was their most important daily responsibility. The answers from this group of participants came a bit easier than it did from the entry-year assistant principal participants. Several themes were clearly identified in their responses.

School safety. School safety and preparation for the school building and staff response to acts of violence were identified by five of the experienced principal participants as their new *most important daily responsibility*. “My number one daily responsibility probably relates to safety” (Participant B5). “My job is to ensure a safe, creative, and proper learning environment” (Participant A3). “Having building systems

that work so kids are physically safe, safe emotionally, safe mentally, that underlays everything I do” (Participant A4).

The identification of school safety and preparedness was not a surprising theme to emerge from experienced principals. The post-Columbine culture in public schools today has placed school safety and the anxiety related to it at the top of every building principal’s agenda. With every school shooting, the stakes are raised for the accountability placed upon experienced principals. It should be noted that the experienced principal sample included a principal from an Ohio public school where a school shooting had occurred.

Building relationships. Another theme noted in the experienced principal participant responses identified the importance of a principal building maintaining effective relationships with constituents. A principal needs to spend every day establishing and reinforcing culture, vision, and trust.

I think the most important responsibility that I have is the culture and the people. You really need to learn how to build relationships with students, with parents, and with teachers. It all goes back to that whole Todd Whitaker thing; people before programs. I think you have to have that trust, that relationship, that culture that everyone around you believes that I’m not going to do anything that’s detrimental to the district or the building. We are always trying to move forward. (Participant B2)

While relationships are a strong theme that emerged, five experienced principal participants identified that a principal is required to develop an ability to have difficult conversations to be effective every day. “You have to be able to have tough

conversations; you don't want to hurt feelings, but you have to be candid" (Participant A4). "I have a whole box of Kleenex on my desk and they are not for kids" (Participant A2).

The ability of a principal to have difficult but needed conversations with difficult individuals is a critical skill required to be effective at the above cited theme of relationship building. The participant responses regarding this skill led the discussion to another theme that, while connected to the relationship theme, seems to stand on its own.

Managing disruptive adults. A principal's primary responsibility is to manage disruptive adults and problematic adult behavior. "My number one responsibility is managing the emotional capacity of the adults around me. As a building leader, just managing everyone's emotions all day long" (Participant A2). "It's never the kids that are the issue; my number one responsibility is dealing with adult issues" (Participant A1).

The concept that experienced principals are responsible for managing adult behavior was a strong theme that was evident in their responses. A number of anecdotal stories shared by experienced principals ultimately involved disruptive adults. The idea that teachers handle students and principals handle adults was stressed by many of the participants.

Perceptions of Preparation

After attempting to identify what each entry-year assistant principal felt was their most important daily responsibility, participants were asked if they felt that the formal and informal preparation and training that they received prior to assuming the assistant principal role adequately prepared them for that identified responsibility.

Eight of the 10 participants stated that they did not feel that their training prepared them for the assistant principal job. “You don’t know what you don’t know” (Participant C1). “There is no way to really prepare you for this role” (Participant D2). “On-the-job experience has been more beneficial to what I’m doing right now than the actual school coursework” (Participant C2).

Two participants stated that they did feel prepared for the assistant principal role and cited specific teaching experiences. “Yes, I had quite a bit of support and training at ECOT so I felt prepared when I returned to public school” (Participant D5). “Because of my special education training, I felt prepared for the legal and procedural parts” (Participant C5).

The responses regarding an assessment of their preparation for their current role was woven throughout most of the focus group interview. While participants offered short responses to this specific question, the comments included in many of their other responses communicated a deep feeling of unpreparedness for the realities of the assistant principal job. The entry-year assistant principal participants who stated that they felt prepared specifically cited responsibilities like supervision of the building special education programming and their experience as special education teaching as a reason for their feelings of being prepared for the job.

Seven of the 10 experienced principal participants stated that they did not feel prepared for the role.

The training that I got that prepared me for the realities of this job did not come from any formal training. It was from life and the challenges of providing leadership and support. Sometimes I go home and I’m so emotionally depleted. I

need to sit alone in the quiet for 30 minutes and then I can have a conversation with somebody. (Participant A2)

“The assistant principal role is what prepared me for the principalship. My licensure preparation before the assistant principal role had nothing to do with what I found myself doing as an assistant principal” (Participant A3).

Three experienced principal participants provided a blended answer, stating that they felt prepared in some aspects and unprepared in others.

I think it is a combination, the experience you get in the classroom, it’s critical, but the further into the principal’s job that you get, experiences there start to take over as far as growth. I think as you are preparing for that first principal job, certain experiences, university preparation is important, but the longer you do the job you start to find a balance where it’s day-to-day experience and training that help your professional growth. (Participant B2)

Experienced principal participants noted the necessity of some of the formal training that goes along with being prepared for the principal role. Specifically, participants noted that things like the finance course have very little applicability to the entry-year principal and they reflect on the course as not valuable. Then, when they become principals, the importance of that information becomes clear and they realize the importance.

Entry-Year “On-the-Job” Experiences

Participants were asked to reflect and identify any critical “on-the-job experiences” that they encountered during their entry year in administration and describe how they felt the experience assisted in their professional development and preparation

for their administrative role. Two themes emerged from the entry-year assistant principals in their responses to this question. While there was variance in the specific details, all responses clustered around these two themes.

Crisis event. The first theme was the most dominant in the entry-year assistant principal participant responses and was cited by nine of the 10 participants. A school crisis was identified as the most impactful professional learning experience of their entry year. Participants were able to describe in detail, the event or crisis and shared the details of their specific role on the building administrative team as the school dealt with the crisis. Five of the 10 entry-year assistant principals cited examples that included threats of school violence or a student death either by suicide or accident. The most striking part of the experience was the realization by entry-year assistant principals of the number of individuals or groups either directly involved or impacted by the crisis and its resolution. Each participant who shared a story highlighted the strength and ability of their principal and other experienced administrators as they worked through the incident.

We had a threat written on a bathroom wall that said, “don’t come to school this day,” and half of the school didn’t show up based on the threats. In the wake of that, people started reporting other things on social media. Things just seemed to spiderweb off of the initial threat and we ended up with kids suspended and expelled. I learned a lot just watching my principal. To see the whole process unfold has been eye opening. (Participant C1)

The running joke in our office is that there are a lot of firsts that you are going to experience and I now have the feeling that they are trying to give me all of them in the first year. We lost a student to a medical accident. He was injured late in

the football season, had surgery, and three weeks later developed a blood clot and died on the opening day of the basketball season. That changes your whole year. It's been seven months and our student body is still dealing with it. I spent probably 75% of my days on mental health issues. There were so many things this year that were eye openers. I was informed that several of his friends scattered some of his ashes on the 50 yard line of the football field and that information is now out and I have all sorts of people upset. How are these kids going to play there with him on the field. I think the most important thing that I heard this year was my principal tell me, "You are here for a reason, It's OK." (Participant D2)

Combative parent. The second theme noted in the entry-year assistant principal responses identified a highly charged interaction with a combative parent as a critical on-the-job experience that participants cited as a professional growth opportunity. Responses clustered around combative parent interaction in two arenas: student discipline and special education services.

A kid showed up to the first football game with a polar pop cup full of whiskey. So before the school year even started I had to deal with a parent who cussed me out for 10 minutes because it was obviously my fault. I always thought that a principal had to have thick skin, but obviously there is a whole new level of thick skin you have to have in this job. When people don't take responsibility for their own actions, they are usually going to lash out at the person who has to call them out on it. That was an enjoyable third day on the job. (Participant D1)

“I had no experience with 504 plans and IEPs, but those are both on my list of responsibilities. I often argue with parents about accommodations.” (Participant C2)

While the building level crisis was identified by participants as the most impactful learning opportunity encountered during their first year, dealing with a confrontational adult was described as more frequently occurring and therefore participants had an opportunity to grow with each repeated occurrence.

Experienced principal participants were asked to reflect on and identify critical on-the-job experiences that they encountered during their entry year in administration and describe how the experience assisted in their preparation for the principal role.

Student discipline. Critical experiences that centered on a major student discipline issue were identified. Participants noted that a major student discipline incident inherently has a variety of responsibilities associated with it. An assistant principal is responsible for the procedural due process requirements, investigation skills, communication with different stakeholders, addressing combative adults, and potential community- and/or media-based political aspects. “You definitely deal with squirrely kids, and families that come in and ask, ‘How dare you discipline little Johnny’!” (Participant B4)

School safety. School safety issues, specifically those associated with threats of school violence were identified as critical experiences.

I had a couple experiences where I had to take a gun from a student. I don’t think there is a day that goes by now that I don’t question if I could do something differently to make my building and my kids safer. (Participant B3)

“With safety issues, social media adds a whole new level of difficulty. Nowadays it takes you longer to dial the number for that one phone call before it’s all over social media”

(Participant A4).

The responses of experienced principals to this focus group interview question circled back to the question where experienced principals identified school safety as their number one daily responsibility. Reflecting on their own critical learning experiences from their own entry years clearly cited incidents that connect to their current anxiety regarding safety. The confounding aspect of social media was noted and the reality that most students and teachers are carrying phones adds difficulty to communication during a crisis.

Reflecting on their entry year, experienced principals cited assuming responsibility for a major managerial aspect of building leadership was identified as a critical learning experience.

I think one of the biggest learning opportunities that first year was meeting with all of the other administrators and it was informational and supportive. You feel free to ask questions and seek mentors. It might be something simple like being responsible for running the bell system or something as complicated as coordinating a commencement ceremony. Having support that first year made an impact. I also think you have to be given some experiences with budget and facilities. (Participant A4)

Labor dispute. The experienced principals also identified the supervision of a school building during a period of labor dispute and/or contract negotiations was cited as a pivotal learning experience. “A new administrator should go through union contract

negotiations that first year. At this point in my career, I still struggle with it. I learned how to manage things during that time” (Participant A4).

Similar to the identification of the school building crisis as a critical learning opportunity, experienced principal participants cited leading a building during contract negotiations or a labor management dispute as highly valuable. It appears that the nature of crisis escalates tension and tests relationships. These situations, according to experienced principals escalates the potential for valuable professional growth.

Assigned or Spontaneous Experience

Participants were asked whether they believed that the professional growth that they experienced during their entry year was more greatly impacted by the day-to-day performance of a set of prescribed duties assigned by their building principal or by their engagement in the previously described, spontaneous, naturally occurring crisis events.

The responses of the entry-year assistant principal participants stated that the professional growth available to an entry-year administrator through their leadership and involvement in a crisis is far more powerful than the performance of the daily assigned duties.

There were no classes or training that I received in my licensure program that prepared me for this. This was a new kind of event for me; we fumbled through it together. I was just floating around in this sea of events and it was a great learning experience. I got to see it from a lot of different perspectives, and it was overwhelming for my first year. As an assistant principal, you get to learn from those around you and it really leaves a mark. I learned a lot. It was an incredible learning experience. (Participant D3)

“No matter how good you think your preparation program was, you’re the one who’s making the decisions in that moment. I feel more prepared now having gone through that experience” (Participant D1).

Two entry-year assistant principal participants noted the professional growth that occurs through the completion of daily responsibilities, as it teaches an administrator to balance a workload that initially seems insurmountable. “The long list of daily duties is part of being an assistant principal and you have to find ways to demonstrate leadership while meeting those responsibilities” (Participant D3).

Entry-year assistant principals overwhelmingly identified the crisis event as the most impactful when compared with the involvement in the daily grind of assigned duties. While nine of the 10 participants cited the crisis, there was a definite acknowledgment that they felt more confident with daily duties gained through repetition.

The same question posed to experienced principals yielded three separate categories of response. First, experienced principals felt that the day-to-day performance of set duties yielded the greatest value in regards to professional development. “It’s about the experience, the grind of leadership, you learn a lot from daily responsibilities, and you need to learn to adapt and adjust to the pace” (Participant B5).

The second set of responses included those who felt that the spontaneous, crisis event provided entry-year administrators unique opportunities for accelerated professional growth.

The learning curve really peaks during crisis and as a new assistant principal, those isolated incidents are definitely the most powerful. That’s when you learn the most. When I look at my career, I can name one or two events each year and

say, “wow I learned something special in each one of those events” and those skills last. (Participant A4)

Finally, experienced principal responses identified a blend of both daily duties and crisis management as the most valuable learning experiences during the entry year.

I think that professional development is a little bit of both of those things. When you have those episodic events, you learn to move quickly and make decisions in a tight time frame. But in the daily tasks, you really learn how to manage your time. So, both are big learning opportunities. (Participant B4)

The responses of the experienced principals presented a wider range of opinion than the entry-year assistant principals. While the entry-year assistant principals overwhelmingly identified crisis as the most powerful experience, the perspective of an experienced principal, responsible for the supervision of assistant principals, included more of a focus on the mastery of the daily duties traditionally assigned to assistant principals.

Mentorship

The research protocol included two interview questions that were only asked to one of the two participant groups. This construct was unique to the entry-year assistant principal focus group interview instrument. The entry-year assistant principals were asked to identify any mentor or experienced administrator upon whom they relied for guidance and support in their current role.

Three specific groups of individuals were identified by the entry-year assistant principal participants as mentors upon whom they relied for guidance during their entry-year.

The principal. Their current building principal, their direct supervisor.

“Definitely my principal” (Participant D5). “I lucked out, my principal, I depend on her. I’ve been able to make mistakes while working with a supportive mentor” (Participant C5). “Right now my current principal is the most important mentor in my life” (Participant C2).

Another principal. A principal in another building whom they maintained a personal or professional relationship with was also named as an influential mentor. “I also have an assistant principal in another district as a mentor” (Participant D5). “My principal is now the superintendent, I communicated with him” (Participant C1). “Margaret was my principal for eight years. She recommended me for my program” (Participant C5).

Assistant principal peer. Two entry-year assistant principal participants came from leadership teams with multiple assistant principals. In those circumstances, another assistant principal on their leadership team was cited as a mentor. “Chuck is another assistant principal and supportive mentor. I’ve been able to learn from my mistakes” (Participant C5).

Entry-Year “On-the-Job” Experiences: Mentor Perspective

The research protocol included two interview questions that were only asked to one of the two participant groups. This construct was unique to the experienced principal focus group interview instrument. Questions were asked of experienced principals regarding their supervision and mentorship of entry-year administrators. Participants were asked to reflect on and identify critical *on-the-job experiences* that they believed entry-year administrators should go through that had the potential to yield the most

growth in terms of professional development. Attention was paid to the way that the experienced principals described providing direction to recent assistant principals in their entry year. Several strong themes emerged in participant responses to this question.

Crisis event. The most common response to this question was a description of the professional growth available to entry-year assistant principals when they experience a major building level crisis. “I think a first-year person has to be hit with a combustible parent-teacher situation” (Participant A3). “It’s all about how you manage the next crisis, manage the situation, and it becomes a professional learning opportunity” (Participant B4).

An opportunity to go through a crisis of some kind or some kind of traumatic event where they are in the leadership role. I think that’s nothing they ever teach you to do in school. You only learn how to do that on the job. You don’t want to go through it, but when it happens, you work through it, you learn from it. Oh, and I should add, learn how to deal with a bomb threat. (Participant B4)

“They need to see how a crisis team works and the only way to learn how to navigate that unfortunately is to experience it” (Participant A4).

Public event. The experienced principals also identified the need for entry-year assistant principals to take the lead on a public event. This was identified as a unique learning experience. “It might be something very complicated like coordinating some aspect of a graduation ceremony” (Participant A4). “I think I always assign them a public event like Veteran’s Day activities” (Participant A1).

Employee discipline. A theme relating to employee discipline was also identified by experienced principals as an opportunity for professional growth. A situation that

required an entry-year administrator to discipline an employee was identified as a pivotal entry-year event. “I had to discipline a coach within my first six months on the job and he was very menacing and in my face; it was a difficult experience but very good” (Participant A2).

Suspension/expulsion. The experienced principals identified the very first suspension and expulsion hearings conducted by an entry-year administrator, especially one that involved a combative parent as a major learning opportunity.

You might have a situation where you have a relationship with a parent who might be a booster parent and then their kid gets busted for drinking and you have to navigate through that suspension and expulsion. You need to be consistent.

An assistant principal might end up in one or two of those a year. (Participant B2)

While these themes emerged from an analysis of their responses, the experienced principal participants each had a very well defined perspective on what they thought entry-year assistant principals needed to experience. There are many similarities in these themes to their own experiences when they reflected on their entry year.

Table 4.2

Comparison of Themes Observed in Study Participant Responses

Focus Group Question Constructs	Themes Identified by Entry-Year Secondary School Assistant Principal Participants	Themes Identified by Experienced Secondary School Principal Participants
Path to the Principalship	Teacher Leadership Roles Athletics	Teacher Leadership Roles Athletics
Influential People or Factors	Principal Family Member Athletics	Principal Family Member Athletics
Principal Licensure Program Experience	<u>POSITIVE EXPERIENCES</u> Courses-School Law & Finance Cohort Model in Program Case Studies & Scenarios <u>NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES</u> Poor Internship Experiences Entry-year more valuable Student Teaching vs. Internship	<u>POSITIVE EXPERIENCES</u> Case Studies & Scenarios Cohort Model in Program Courses-School Law & Finance <u>NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES</u> Poor Internship Experience Theoretical vs. Authentic Principal vs. Assistant Preparation Student Teaching vs. Internship
Primary Responsibilities	Role Ambiguity Relationship Building and Culture	School Safety Relationship Building and Culture Difficult Conversations Managing Disruptive Adults
Perceptions of Preparation	8 Participants=No (Not prepared) 2 Participants=Yes (Prepared)	7 Participants=No (Not Prepared) 3 Participants stated Yes and No
Entry-Year “On the Job” Experiences	Experiencing a School Crisis Combative Parent Incident	Major Student Discipline Issue School Safety Issue Managerial Aspect of Leadership Labor Management Issue
Assigned or Spontaneous	Most Participants Identified Spontaneous Events	Spontaneous Events Daily Duties Blended Responses
Mentorship	The Current Principal Principal in Another Building Another Assistant Principal	Not Included in Instrument
Entry-Year “On the Job” Experiences: Mentor Perspective	Not Included in Instrument	Experiencing a School Crisis Lead a Public event Conduct Employee Discipline Suspension/Expulsion Process

As a summary of the themes identified in the analysis of participant responses,

Table 4.2 provides a graphic view of the themes identified in the responses from entry-

year secondary school assistant principals and experienced secondary school principals to the eight cited research topics or constructs contained in the focus group interview instrument. The first column in the table lists the construct embedded in the focus group interview instrument. The second column lists the themes that emerged from an analysis of the entry-year assistant principal participant responses to the interview questions addressing each construct. Column three lists the themes that emerged from an analysis of the experienced principal participant responses to the interview questions addressing each construct.

Answering the Research Questions

The research methodology and protocols used in this study facilitated a collection of data from 10 experienced secondary school principals and 10 entry-year secondary school assistant principals. After analysis of all focus group interview transcripts, a systematic review of the findings in each of the identified topic areas addressed by the focus group interview instrument was conducted. The study provides the following answers to the three stated research questions.

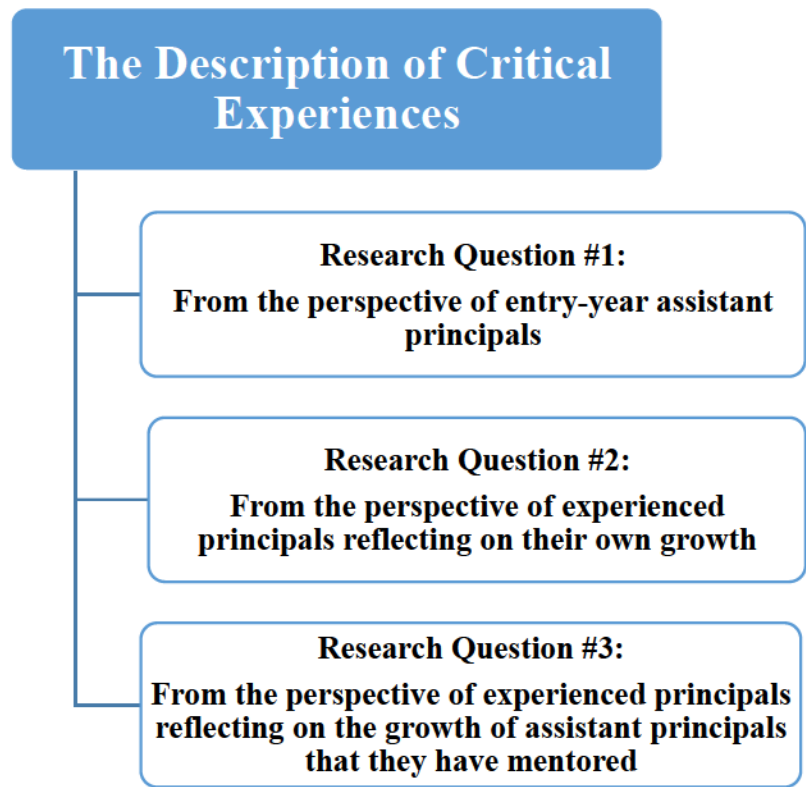


Figure 4.1. Research question chart.

Research Question 1

When providing narrative descriptions of their entry year, what specific educational experiences do secondary school assistant principals identify as valuable and impactful to their preparation for advancement to the school principal position?

- An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience being part of a school building administrative team faced with an **unanticipated crisis**. A few examples provided by the research study participants included a student suicide, an accident involving a student that resulted in a student death, a school-based graffiti or social media post warning of a school shooting, and a major drug arrest at school that implicated a number of other students. The

participants described their individual experiences in detail and the role that they were required to play in the response and resolution of the events.

Commonalities within each identified crisis included the entry-year assistant principal's description of the mentorship and example provided by the more experienced members of their leadership team and the sudden awareness of how many different individuals within the school community and between outside agencies are impacted and involved. Entry-year assistant principals described a feeling where, although they would not wish to experience these events again, they felt that they had acquired a set of skills that they would not have had the ability to acquire through any synthetic principal preparation experience. These crisis events were described by entry-year assistant principals as their most critical professional development experiences during their entry-year.

- An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience a **combustible, confrontational interaction with a significant stakeholder.**

The examples provided by participants included an enraged parent showing up at school angry about the disciplining of their child, a teacher who is angry regarding an interaction with the assistant principal showing up at the office with a teacher's union representative, and a confrontation with an influential community member regarding athletic participation. The assistant principals described the interactions in detail and described the anxiety associated with the experiences. Each experience touched on a number of variables that the assistant principals clearly identified as an area of primary responsibility

within their job descriptions and lists of duties. These experiences clearly occurred more frequently during their entry year and were defined as a critical learning experience that provided significant professional growth. The frequency of these types of incidents provided the assistant principals time to reflect on the incident following the resolution. It was cited by the participants that through the process of reflection and access to counsel with a trusted mentor regarding the outcome, subsequent experiences had improved outcomes and entry-year assistant principals had an increased level of confidence.

Research Question 2

Reflecting on their own personal entry-year experiences, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

- When reflecting on their own entry year, experienced principals clearly identified the **mastery of the student discipline process** as a valuable learning experience. Participants cited a variety of aspects involved in student discipline and identified the development of specific professional skills that occurred through their management of the student due process procedure, learning how to conduct an investigation into an incident, and handling the combative adults involved in the discipline incidents. The experienced principals credited their student discipline experiences during their entry year

with assisting to develop their awareness to the community connections and political aspects of the principal job.

- Involvement with **school safety incidents** was also identified by experienced principals as a critical learning experience that they participated in during their entry year. Specific examples included taking a gun away from a troubled student, the school response to a bomb threat, and the impact of social media on school threats and community response to an incident. The predominant aspect of this critical learning experience was the number of individuals and agencies associated with a school leader's response to the incident.
- The experienced principals, reflecting on their own entry year, identified their participation in some aspect of **labor-management relations** as a critical learning experience. Specifically, a number of participants provided similar descriptions of being put on the management side of the table for the contract negotiations with the teacher's union. These experiences were described as opportunities that provided a unique perspective on the requirement that principals build relationships and trust in a variety of settings. These experiences were also described by participants as only being available on the job.

Research Question 3

Reflecting on their professional experiences working with entry-year assistant principals, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary

school principals identify as valuable and impactful to current entry-year assistant principals in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

- Experienced secondary school principals identified a **school crisis** event as a pivotal professional development experience for entry-year assistant principals. Participants stated that this is a difficult aspect as you can't schedule a crisis; but when one does occur, it can be one of the most valuable learning experiences for entry-year administrators. Experienced principals stated that a crisis teaches beginning administrators about the multi-faceted nature of responding to incidents that can only be taught by going through it yourself. There are many different resources involved in crisis response. A critical part of the experience is working as a member of a team, so success is dependent upon having a good leader or mentor in the process with them. The participants cited the debriefing and reflection that needs to occur throughout the crisis as an important part of developing new skills.
- Experienced principals identified the critical learning available to entry-year assistant principals when they are placed in charge of the **planning and implementation of a large school event**. Examples provided by the participants included a commencement or awards ceremony, a holiday observance, or the development of a master schedule. Examples provided that involve a public audience or school-community cooperation yield the greatest potential for professional development. Throughout the examples, participants noted the imperative that beginning administrators develop an

awareness of the socio-political aspects of school leadership and cite large public school events as a vehicle for those experiences and learning.

- Experienced principals identified a sensitive **labor management dispute** as a critical learning experience for entry-year assistant principals. Specifically, the professional growth that occurs as a result of an entry-year assistant principal disciplining a teacher or staff member is extremely valuable. While often not an uplifting experience, these interactions provide an opportunity for the development of leadership skills and communication skills. The participants noted that the involvement of a combative teacher union representative and specific contract language governing employee discipline can add to the professional learning from the incident. The experienced principals reinforced the idea that a strong principal mentor is a critical part of facilitating the professional development of entry-year assistant principals in this circumstance.

Survey Results

This research study used focus group interviews incorporating experienced secondary school principals and entry-year secondary school assistant principals to explore the stated research questions. A survey (Appendix J) was developed in which each research question was stated, followed by the findings of the study, specifically, a researcher authored description of the experiences identified by the study participants as *specific educational experiences* and *specific job-embedded experiences* for entry-year secondary school assistant principals as they prepared for advancement to the principal position.

The survey instrument was developed and incorporated in the research study methodology to provide triangulation in the research design and sought corroboration of the research study findings from a group of survey recipients larger than the research study sample.

The survey instrument was sent via email to all 78 experienced school principals participating as mentors in the 2018 Beginning Administrators Mentorship Program (BAMA), and to all 51 entry-year secondary school assistant principals participating in the 2018 Beginning Administrators Mentorship Program (BAMA). Each recipient was informed that all responses to the survey were used for data analysis purposes and all identifiable personal data were confidential.

The survey instrument asked the recipient to review each research question as well as the comprehensive descriptions of the critical professional growth experiences authored by the researcher following the analysis of the data from the focus group interviews. Those descriptions were followed by a Likert scale displaying a scale of 1 (*Do Not Agree*) through 5 (*Completely Agree*). Recipients were asked to complete a rating for each item, identifying the level to which they personally agree or disagree with the findings.

Of the surveys distributed to entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals, 37 surveys were completed and returned to the researcher. Tables 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5 display the mean Likert scale ratings for each of the descriptions provided under the research question.

Research Question 1

When providing narrative descriptions of their entry-year, what specific educational experiences do secondary school assistant principals identify as valuable and impactful to their preparation for advancement to the school principal position?

Table 4.3

Mean Ratings of Survey Respondents to Research Question 1 Descriptions

Research Question #1- Study Findings	Survey Respondent Data (Mean Rating)
An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience being part of a school building administrative team faced with an unanticipated crisis event.	4.41
An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience a combustible, confrontational interaction with a significant stakeholder.	4.32

The survey respondents provided ratings indicating the level to which they agreed with the stated research findings for research question number one. Each description of a critical job embedded experience was rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating *do not agree* and 5 indicating *completely agree* with the finding. The mean ratings for the descriptions were 4.41 and 4.32. When applied to the Likert scale used, respondents indicated a strong level of agreement with both of the findings.

Research Question 2

Reflecting on their own personal entry-year experiences, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

Table 4.4

Mean Ratings of Survey Respondents to Research Question 2 Descriptions

Research Question #2-Study Findings	Survey Respondent Data (Mean Rating)
The mastery of the student discipline process	4.69
Involvement with school safety incident	4.41
Active participation in labor management relations	3.68

Research question number two asked experienced secondary school principals to reflect on their own entry year and identify critical job embedded experiences that they felt had an impact on their preparation for their current role. The survey respondents provided ratings indicating the level to which they agreed with the stated research findings for research question number two. Each description of a critical job embedded experience was rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating *do not agree* and 5 indicating *completely agree* with the finding. The mean ratings for the descriptions were 4.69, 4.41, and 3.68. When applied to the Likert scale used, respondents indicated a strong level of agreement with the first two of the findings. The third, a description of a labor management responsibility, specifically participation in contract negotiations, yielded the lowest Likert scale rating of the survey. While lower than the other two findings for research question number two, it does indicate agreement by the survey respondents.

Research Question 3

Reflecting on their professional experiences working with entry-year assistant principals, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful to current entry-year assistant principals in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

Table 4.5

Mean Ratings of Survey Respondents to Research Question 3 Descriptions

Research Question #3-Study Findings	Survey Respondent Data (Mean Rating)
A school crisis event	4.57
Being placed in charge of the planning and implementation of a large school event.	4.24
A labor-management dispute	4.00

The survey respondents provided ratings indicating the level to which they agreed with the stated research findings for research question number three. Each description of a critical job-embedded experience was rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating *do not agree* and 5 indicating *completely agree* with the finding. The mean ratings for the descriptions were 4.57, 4.24, and 4.00. When applied to the Likert scale used, respondents indicated a strong level of agreement with all three of the findings for research question number three.

The Impact of Participant Gender on the Findings

As Table 4.1 illustrates, within the research sample of 20 research study participants, 11 were male and 9 were female. In an attempt to discover if there were any side-findings associated with the gender of the participant experience in their entry year, the researcher reviewed transcripts from all participants to explore if there were any significant variation in responses to the focus group interview questions based upon the gender of the participant. One of the nine female participants shared an entry-year experience of an incident involving gender bias while disciplining an athletic coach. The experience was significant enough for the participant to describe the incident to the researcher when selecting pivotal experiences that an entry-year administrator should encounter. While the incident left an impression on the participant, she also identified it as a professional growth opportunity. The researcher observed no other input from the remaining eight female participants regarding the impact of gender on any aspect of the entry year; however, it should be noted that the research study focus group interview tool did not directly ask any question regarding it. In the remainder of responses, no discernible variance in the responses and subsequently observed common themes identified by both experienced secondary school principals and entry-year secondary school assistant principals was noted regardless of gender.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The effectiveness of the school principal is second only to the effectiveness of the classroom teacher when examining the factors that influence student success (Hattie, 2017; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Research confirmed that strong, effective principals have positive effects on the schools that they lead, and subsequently, a direct influence on student achievement (Fuller et al., 2007; Fuller et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008; Shortridge, 2015; Walker et al., 2013).

Public education has faced an unprecedented shortage of qualified school leaders in the last several decades (Thompson, 2010). The lack of qualified principals in public schools worsened as the population of experienced school leaders reaching retirement age was combined with an unprecedented rate of attrition from the principal position (Blackman & Fenwick, 2000; Superville, 2014; Thompson, 2010). Recent data indicate that nearly half of all newly hired principals leave the position by their third year, either returning to the classroom or leaving the field of education entirely (Superville, 2014). When principals choose to leave the position, they frequently cite that they felt unprepared for the realities and responsibilities associated with the role (Superville, 2014). In the face of such staggering attrition from the principal ranks, if those responsible for the recruitment, training, licensure, and mentorship of new school building leaders continue on the current path, without directly addressing the causal factors at play in the decision of new building leaders to vacate the positions, there will simply not be enough new leaders to fill the vacancies.

The development of competent, qualified principals requires a purposeful connection between post-graduate principal licensure programs and the concept that internship requirements and field experiences are critical to the development of leaders prepared for the realities of the principal job (Fuller et al., 2016; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2006). The participants in this study described learning many of the skills necessary to be successful through on-the-job experiences. Participants also cited the presence of influential principals who, acting as mentors, facilitated their professional growth and provided coaching through the reflection necessary following new experiences. The inclusion of fieldwork into the training of school leaders, especially when that fieldwork is conducted under the mentorship of an experienced principal, produces administrators who have developed the confidence associated with an ability to apply the things that they have learned in the classroom in the real-world (Clarke & Wildy, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry et al., 2005; Lovely, 2004; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

However, challenges exist in accepting the assumption that principal licensure programs alone prepare candidates for the realities of school leadership. Preparation for the principal position, especially in secondary education, begins after an individual has completed a principal preparation program, secured a licensure to practice, and obtained the entry level position of assistant principal (Adams & Copland, 2007; Vogel & Weiler, 2014). The assistant principal role is often identified as the required precursor to the principal position and has been a longstanding pathway to the principalship and other educational leadership positions (Armstrong, 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark & Davis 2000; Militello et al., 2009; Winter, 2002). Bastian and Henry (2015) stated that the effectiveness of early career principals is affected by their experiences as an assistant

principal. With very limited exception, any study of the development and training of the secondary school assistant principal has been neglected in research as principal preparation programs and most research associated with licensure of school leaders traditionally focus on the preparation of individuals for the principal position (Cranston et al., 2004; Lopez, 2003; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Weller, & Weller, 2002). There exists a widely accepted assumption that serving your time in the assistant principal role naturally prepares individuals for the principal position (Daresh, 2004; Kwan, 2008; Oliver, 2003). A review of the available literature illustrates that the absence of a clear description of the position of assistant principal convolutes any systemic attempts to proactively address their professional growth (May, 2016; Rogers, 2009). Individuals new to the principal role stated that they were unprepared for the range of responsibilities and unprepared for the time commitment and pace, despite previously serving in the assistant principal position (Busch et al., 2010; Kwan, 2009; May, 2016; Ng, 2013; Sackney & Walker 2006).

The most impactful variable in the professional development of assistant principals is on-the-job experience that occurs in the context of the real world (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2012; Ciroka, 2015; Seashore et al., 2010). Providing assistant principals authentic learning experiences and then providing a mentor who can facilitate reflection on those experiences and coaching through their outcomes are foundational parts of the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984).

This study examined the educational and professional experiences of both entry-year secondary school assistant principals and experienced secondary school principals

with the purpose of identifying critical experiences that participants cite as impactful to the professional growth and development of entry-year assistant principals.

Summary of the Findings

This research study used a focus group interview format with both entry-year secondary school assistant principals and experienced secondary school principals. The focus group interview tool asked participants a series of questions examining eight different constructs drawn from a review of the literature regarding the professional development of the school principal and exploring the background and experiences encountered by each of the participants. In addition to the eight individual constructs, a focus group question examined the impact of school district typology on the experiences of the participants. The researcher also took note of any impact of participant gender evident in the focus group responses.

The Eight Constructs

The path to the principalship. The entry-year secondary school assistant principals and the experienced secondary school principals were each asked to provide a description of the professional path they took to their current position.

Influential people or factors. The entry-year secondary school assistant principals and the experienced secondary school principals were each asked to identify a motivating factor or individual person that influenced them to pursue the principal position.

Principal licensure program experience. The participants were asked to reflect on their principal licensure programs and cite specific experiences in their respective programs that they felt prepared them well for the realities of their administrative

position. They were also asked if they could cite any specific experiences in their principal licensure program that, in their opinion, did not offer much value in regards to their preparation for the realities of their administrative position.

Primary responsibilities. The entry-year secondary school assistant principals and the experienced secondary school principals were each asked to identify what they perceived as the most important daily responsibility of their current role.

Perceptions of preparation. Entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals were asked if they felt that their training, both formal and informal, prepared them to meet the demands of their most important daily responsibility.

Entry-year “on-the-job” experiences. This focus group interview question asked participants to identify specific experiences they encountered during their entry year that each considered a critical learning experience. Entry-year assistant principals were responding as they completed their entry year while experienced principals were asked to reflect on their own entry year.

Assigned duties or spontaneous experiences. Following the solicitation of what the participants felt were critical learning experiences they encountered during their entry year, participants were asked to reflect on the things that they considered as the most critical professional learning experiences they encountered during their entry years. Were they the product of their completion of daily assigned duties, or were they incidents that were defined as isolated crisis events?

Mentorship. This construct was explored only with in the entry-year assistant principal participants. Participants were asked if they could identify an individual that they relied upon throughout their entry year for guidance and mentorship.

Entry-year “on-the-job” experiences: Mentor perspective. This construct was explored in the focus group interview tool with a question that was only provided to the experienced principal participants. Participants were asked to reflect on the experiences of entry-year assistant principals for whom they acted in a supervisory capacity. All of the participants had experiences where they were responsible for the direct mentorship and supervision of assistant principals in their building. The question asked participants to identify critical on-the-job experiences that they felt were important to provide to entry-year assistant principals.

Answering the Research Questions

From these eight identified constructs, focus group questions exploring each construct were developed by the researcher. The focus groups were conducted and data were gathered and transcribed. An analysis of the responses of entry-year secondary school assistant principal and experienced secondary school principal participant responses was then conducted. From this analysis, eight themes were identified in the participant responses. Two themes were identified in response to research question number one, three themes for research question number two, and three themes for research question number three.

Following a review and analysis of the individual themes in the specific construct areas, the researcher provided comprehensive descriptions of the experiences and concepts that emerged from the focus group data. These descriptions provided answers to the research questions. A survey (Appendix J) was then developed in which each research question was stated, followed by the findings of the study, specifically, the researcher authored description of the experiences identified by the study participants.

The survey instrument was developed and incorporated in the research study methodology to provide triangulation in the research design and sought corroboration of the research study findings from a group of survey recipients larger than the research study sample.

The survey instrument asked the recipient to review each research question as well as the comprehensive descriptions of the critical professional growth experiences authored by the researcher. Those descriptions were followed by a Likert scale displaying a scale of 1 (*Do Not Agree*) through 5 (*Completely Agree*). Recipients were asked to complete a rating for each item, identifying the level to which they personally agree or disagree with the findings. The descriptions provided by the research study participants below each research question are followed by the mean rating from the collected survey data.

Research question 1. When providing narrative descriptions of their entry-year, what specific educational experiences do secondary school assistant principals identify as valuable and impactful to their preparation for advancement to the school principal position?

- An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience being part of a school building administrative team faced with an unanticipated crisis. A few examples provided by the research study participants included a student suicide, an accident involving a student that resulted in a student death, a school-based graffiti or social media post warning of a school shooting, and a major drug arrest at school that implicated a number of other students.

- An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience a combustible, confrontational interaction with a significant stakeholder. The examples provided by participants included an enraged parent showing up at school angry about the disciplining of their child, a teacher who is angry regarding an interaction with the assistant principal showing up at the office with a teacher's union representative, and a confrontation with an influential community member regarding athletic participation.

The survey instrument provided mean ratings and a source of triangulation to the findings. The mean survey ratings for the question one descriptions were 4.41 for the first description and 4.32 for the second description. Given the survey Likert scale of one to five, these mean ratings indicate a high level of agreement with the findings.

Research question 2. Reflecting on their own personal entry-year experiences, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

- When reflecting on their own entry year, experienced principals clearly identified the mastery of the student discipline process as a valuable learning experience.
- Involvement with school safety incidents were identified by experienced principals as critical learning experiences that they participated in during their entry year. Specific examples included taking a gun away from a troubled student, the school response to a bomb threat, and the impact of social media on school threats and community response to an incident.

- The experienced principals, reflecting on their own entry year, identified their participation in some aspect of labor-management relations as a critical learning experience.

The survey instrument provided mean ratings and a source of triangulation to the findings. The mean survey ratings for research question number two indicated the first description was rated at 4.69, the second description was rated at 4.41, and the final description provided a rating of 3.68. Given the survey Likert scale of one to five respondents to the survey instrument indicated a strong level of agreement with the first two findings for research question number two. The third finding was a description of a labor management responsibility, specifically participation in contract negotiations. This mean rating, while still indicating agreement with the finding, provided the lowest Likert scale rating of the survey.

Research question 3. Reflecting on their professional experiences working with entry-year assistant principals, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful to current entry-year assistant principals in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

- Experienced secondary school principals identified a school crisis event as a pivotal professional development experience for entry-year assistant principals.
- Experienced principals identified the critical learning available to entry-year assistant principals when they are placed in charge of the planning and implementation of a large school event. Examples provided by the

participants included a commencement or awards ceremony, a holiday observance, or the development of a master schedule.

- Experienced principals identified a sensitive labor management dispute as a critical learning experience for entry-year assistant principals.

The mean survey ratings for research question number three indicated the first description of a job embedded experience was rated at 4.57, indicating strong agreement. The second description provided a rating of 4.24, and the third description, a rating of 4.00. Survey respondents indicated a strong level of agreement with all three of the findings.

Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to use the principles of andragogy and experiential learning to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the job-embedded experiences that contribute to the development of the skills necessary for assistant principals to advance successfully to the principalship. The literature reviewed for this study indicated that research into specific experiences that facilitate the personal and professional growth of secondary school assistant principals is a critical task facing education. The need to aggressively address the attrition from the secondary school principal ranks through the development of the next generation of school leaders drove this research study.

This study investigated the specific educational and job-embedded professional experiences of secondary school assistant principals that facilitate personal and professional growth in their preparation for advancement to the principal position.

Within the conceptual framework of andragogy and experiential learning theory, the research questions explored the specific professional growth experiences of the secondary public school assistant principal. The preparation of assistant principals must be purposeful, as the traditional paradigm of an individual simply performing the traditional requirements of the assistant principal role is insufficient as a means to develop the necessary skills to successfully assume the principal position (Kwan, 2008).

In the case of this study, the experiences of entry-year secondary assistant principals were explored with the understanding that there can be great variance in what each participant considers an impactful experience. The focus group explored a range of topics with the intent of collecting as much descriptive data as possible. The variety of workplace settings represented by the sample and the range of topics explored attempted to capture participant descriptions common to the positions of entry-year secondary school assistant principals as well as experienced secondary school principals.

Discussion of Research Constructs

The collection of data in this study began with the eight constructs explored in the focus group questions. A discussion and understanding of the participant responses in each construct provided a basis for the development of the themes that formed the foundation of the answers to the three research questions.

The path to the principalship. Both entry-year secondary school assistant principals and experienced principals provided similar responses when asked to describe the professional path that they took to their current school leadership position. While there was some variation in the specific pathways, the themes identified in the descriptions provided by both entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals

were identical. All of the participants during the course of the focus groups shared descriptions of leadership tasks associated with assignments that were components of their respective principal licensure coursework. The commonalities in participant responses also existed in the responsibilities and roles that preceded the beginning of their formal licensure programs. Specifically, they identified their involvement in various leadership roles open to teachers including grade level team leadership, volunteerism for district-led curricular revision projects, and opportunities for the supervision of extra-curricular activities. The question that exists is whether their individual personalities and strengths served to motivate their participation in teacher leadership responsibilities or whether their involvement in teacher leadership responsibilities precipitated their interest in school leadership. The personality traits and intrinsic motivations commonly associated with emerging leaders were evident during the focus group interactions, and while the natural gravitation of these particular participants towards leadership roles may have been a foregone conclusion, each described impactful experiences that solidified their paths. As participants shared their personal pathways to their current administrative position, the description of their entrance into teacher leadership was connected to the presence or involvement of an influential person or event.

The involvement in athletics was another clear theme that emerged. Participants shared descriptions of their participation in sports and their selection as team captains or informal leaders. Those descriptions seemed closely linked to intrinsic motivation for advancement and the emergence of what could be described as natural leadership skills. The description of athletic coaching and athletic event management or direction was also described by both entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals when sharing

the experiences that influenced their motivation to seek principal licensure. Participation in athletics as a paid coach or an individual responsible for athletic management and supervision emerged as a common theme in participant responses. These athletic responsibilities described by participants included volunteer coaching responsibilities, game day crowd supervision, involvement as a representative of a coaching staff during transitions, and athletic department meetings. Specific experiences associated with athletic leadership and coaching appeared to be typical leadership roles associated with individuals ascending to leadership positions within teaching staffs as they are the first formal opportunities for a paid leadership position available to teachers. Based upon the professional paths shared by participants who had a wide variety of backgrounds, teaching experiences, and worked in very different school settings, that athletic leadership appeared to be a common experiences for individuals seeking school leadership positions. As with other descriptions, the same question exists in reflection on this common trait. Did an intrinsic desire for leadership facilitate an individual's involvement and success in athletic leadership, or did success in athletic leadership open doors and motivate a path towards the principalship?

A great deal of leadership research has been devoted to examining leadership in the field of athletics, specifically in the study of coaching behaviors (Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006). Athletic coaching is a common venue for teachers seeking leadership opportunities. When looking for examples of effective leadership, researchers look to athletic coaches because their list of responsibilities mirrors the leadership responsibilities in many different fields (Chelladurai, 2012). The responsibilities of an athletic coach parallel other leadership roles, including educational leadership, in that

they require strategic planning, the development and supervision of specific approaches to instruction, and personnel decisions (Loughead et al., 2006).

Influential people or factors. The responses from entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals to the previous question provided two unanticipated segues to the next question. Participants were asked if they could identify an influential person or factor that served as an impetus to their decision to pursue principal licensure. Again, the responses from both groups of participants were the same. Two distinct categories of influential people were provided including individuals identified as family members and what participants, regardless of their role as an entry-year assistant principal or an experienced principal described as an influential principal. The naming of a school leader as the most influential factor in their decision to pursue principal licensure was the strongest theme to emerge in response to this question. In addition, when reviewing the transcripts of the focus groups, the principal named in response to this question was woven throughout other responses provided by each participant. It was clear at the conclusion of the focus groups that the individual principal described in this section by participants played a truly inspirational role in nurturing and motivating individuals considering school leadership. Participants often reflected on the role that their principal played in their path towards the principalship and reflected on having the ability to reach out for advice to that individual even though they no longer worked for them.

While participants named individual people in response to this question, athletic involvement was again identified as an influential factor in the motivation to seek principal licensure. Participants reflected upon their coaching participation as a primary factor in their ultimate desire to pursue leadership positions, specifically the

principalship. The described athletic experiences encompassed their participation as an athlete, acting as a team leader or captain while participating in athletics, their role as an athletic coach, or their participation in athletic supervision and game management in the secondary school setting. Athletic events often require staffing to manage tickets, crowd and student cheering section supervision, concessions, and interaction with game officials and law enforcement. The involvement in athletics provided experiences in areas that approximated many principal duties from event management and supervision and budgeting, through supervision and potentially evaluation of staff.

Principal licensure program experience. The participant responses provided by both entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals provided two different types of themes. The themes could be categorized into positive and negative perspectives.

The entry-year assistant principals reflected positively on course work content related to law and finance. While many participants described their experiences in post-graduate programs, specifically in their principal preparation licensure programs in negative terms, they appeared to value coursework content that they encountered during their entry year. The same coursework, namely school law and school finance were positively commented on by experienced principals as well. Both groups of participants saw value in coursework that had immediate applicability to the realities of their respective roles. Specific examples included the applicability of the law class to the supervision of special education programs and the finance course offered specific training for the building budgeting, purchase order process, and involvement in community-based school funding initiatives. Examples provided specific experiences where the realities of

their roles required experience with both school law as well as school finance and budgeting. Kolb (1984) stated that tangible experiences are a critical component in adult learning. The tangible nature of concrete experiences like working with school budgeting and complying with the law that govern due process, privacy, and special education services provide entry-year assistant principals almost immediate opportunity to apply theory from their preparation program coursework to actual learning activities. Walker and Kwan (2012) proposed that if university-based principal preparation programs knew exactly what specific expectations would be placed on future principals, preparation programs that are designed to address those expectations would have an advantage when teaching specific leadership skills. When entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals described the school finance and law classes as having provided impactful learning opportunities as they reflected on the realities of their current roles, it serves to support the premise asserted by Walker and Kwan.

There was continued similarity in the other positive themes that emerged from both entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals. Participants described two major aspects of their educational experiences that they encountered during their post-graduate principal licensure programs as positively impacting their professional development and growth.

First, the licensure programs built around the cohort model had a positive impact on the learning process of the participants involved. The professional learning community created by the use of the cohort model provided participants with an immediate peer group, each facing similar challenges. The camaraderie and relationships developed, when immersed in the process of completing coursework and seeking

licensure with other educators appeared to play a pivotal role in the value of the experiences provided by their respective programs. The participants reflected on the value of having a group of peers that they could process issues and explore ideas within a setting that did not have any professional risks or workplace implications. An important component in the descriptions was the presence of a teacher figure, or professor, who was an active practitioner, who provided guidance and direction to the cohort experiences. Beem, (2002) described the positive impact that practitioners bring to the professor role in educational leadership education, specifically cited is their unique ability to bring a practical, real-life application of theory.

The principal preparation programs that incorporated the use of case studies and real-life scenarios into the content and activities of the coursework appeared to have what participants described as a major impact on their acquisition of professional decision-making skills, and a level of confidence when they encountered similar situations in the workplace. Participants described the use of case studies and real-life scenarios as a teaching tool used by their instructors. The participants noted the specific benefit from working in groups, discussing challenges and solutions to detailed case studies. The discussions facilitated a sense of teamwork amongst candidates and fostered practice in the reflective cycle that is a necessary component in experiential learning (Bilica, 2004). The authenticity of problem-solving issues within a supportive group, with access to the mentorship of an experienced instructor held a great deal of value in their preparation for the realities of the principal and assistant principal jobs. The process of discussing case real-life scenarios provided participants not only the opportunity to explore new ideas in the safety of the classroom setting but develop experience with situations that they may

not have an opportunity to encounter in the course of their current role (Yadav, Vinh, Shaver, Meckl, & Firebaugh, 2014).

Entry-year secondary school assistant principals are starting their administrative careers and are therefore closest to the post-graduate principal licensure programs that they participated in. These participants in the research study recently finished their licensure programs and appeared poised to offers timely feedback regarding their experiences. Given the time and resources dedicated by both the participants in said programs and the time and resources spent on providing the appropriate training for the next generation of school leaders, it is remarkable that the responses of entry-year administrators contain very little data that identified principal preparation programs amongst the educational experiences described as impactful by individuals completing their entry-year in school administration. Entry-year secondary school assistant principal participants appeared to place a high value on authentic, on-the-job experiences when identifying impactful professional growth opportunities. In regards to formal educational preparation the use of case-studies and scenarios based on real-life school events holds the greatest value. Entry-year assistant principals provided responses to focus group interview questions regarding the value of their educational experiences. Those descriptions indicated that participants who were involved in coursework experiences that incorporated the use of case studies saw applicability and impact on their current experiences.

The portions of the focus group interview instrument that explored principal licensure programs provided specific feedback regarding the experiences; however, much of it was identified as negative in nature. Participants stated that they wished that their

formal post-graduate program work that prepared them for licensure was more similar to their student teaching experiences. The actual immersion in the classroom and the presence of a supervising mentor figure were valuable components of those descriptions. The absence of any protracted experience with actual immersion in the assistant principal role and the intermittent presence of anyone that they perceived as filling that supervisory, mentoring role was strongly represented.

Entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals generally described dissatisfying internship experiences. The descriptions illustrated the fact that different from student teaching internships, candidates for principal licenses are, for the most part, employed full time in the teaching role. That fact relegates internship experiences for principal licensure programs to extra-responsibilities and often insulates candidates from the school-time realities of the assistant principal or principal positions. The descriptions indicated that participants felt like these workplace constraints often forced internship activities to be synthetic. While participant responses highlighted that there was some variance in the way that each post-graduate licensure program structured their internship requirements, there was distinct similarity in the expressed feelings of participants that it was not authentic to the realities of the position. Several participants described the feeling that they were checking off boxes on a checklist of activities that appeared very disconnected from the real challenges of the principal position. One participant described being required to attend a Board of Education Meeting and take minutes. While the experience was designed to develop an awareness to board politics, the participant felt that it was detached from the things that an assistant principal faced on a daily basis.

Both groups specifically compared their student teaching experiences with their principal licensure internship experiences. This theme explored their level of confidence and perceived preparation and deserved to be identified as a separate theme. The focus group interviews focused on participant experiences in real-world context relating to their preparation for their current roles. Student teaching experiences were described as real world based, immersed in the process of actual teaching, under the supervision of an experienced teacher. The process that unfolded moved them from a state of anxiety to a place where they completed the experience and began their first job with the confidence that they were exposed to the teaching position as they would encounter it when they had a classroom of their own. Participant descriptions juxtaposed student teaching with the principal internship. Participants cited the protracted, hands-on experience of student teaching under the supervision of an experienced teacher as the primary difference between the two experiences. The principal internship was described as devoid of experiences that produced similar feelings and left them entering their first administrative position without the level of confidence and competence in their own abilities. Additionally, the role played by a supervising teacher in their student teaching experiences was not necessarily filled by their administrative supervisor. Participants described experiences when they entered the assistant principal role where the individual that they perceived as their mentor did not provide similar guidance and coaching (Johnson, 2004; Robbins & Alvy, 2014).

Entry-year assistant principals while providing descriptions of their respective educational experiences overwhelmingly described the experiences available on the job

during the entry-year as far more valuable than any coursework or educational experiences that they encountered as they prepared for principal licensure.

Experienced principals, benefitting from the time in the field offered an additional perspective that was categorized as a negative description of their licensure program experience. Participants described coursework as theoretical and not authentic. Responses to focus group questions regarding these specific descriptions revealed that experienced principals described coursework and activities directed at preparing them for certain aspects of the principal positions. Experienced principals described their coursework and preparation in their post-graduate principal licensure programs as theoretical as opposed to authentic. Their preparation programs incorporated very little hands-on work, with very little interpersonal interaction incorporated in their internship experiences. The experienced principal participants also identified their principal licensure programs as specifically directed at preparing them for the principal position when all of the participants related that their first administrative position after completing their licensure was in the assistant principal position. Participants noted that they entered their first administrative position only to realize that they were trained for a completely different position.

Unfortunately, they began their administrative careers in the secondary school assistant principal position and they stated that their programs lacked the authenticity needed to prepare them for those critical first few years.

Primary responsibilities. The participant responses to this question provided some interesting insight into participant awareness of their individual job responsibilities. Entry-year assistant principals struggled to answer this question, noting instead an ever

shifting set of responsibilities. The literature review explored the origins of the assistant principal position and described it as a position developed to address expanding enrollment and the over-burdening of the principal (Mertz & McNeely, 1999). In its inception, the assistant principal was, and in many cases continues to be, a pragmatic tool for the principal without a clearly defined role or consistent job description (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). The inability of the entry-year assistant principals to clearly identify the most important aspect of their role provided observable evidence of the concept of assistant principal role ambiguity.

The interactions that unfolded in the focus group interviews consistently revealed entry-year assistant principals' struggle to define their primary responsibility. This role ambiguity was clearly seen, and participants were openly conflicted when asked to describe what they felt was their primary job responsibility. The similarity between entry-year assistant principal participants when faced with providing a description of their duties and responsibilities was striking. One participant mentioned that researchers had identified over 140 different responsibilities when describing the things an assistant principal encounters on the job.

Given time during the interview, a theme relating to their responsibility to establish and maintain relationships with constituents including teachers, parents, and students also emerged. Participant awareness to their responsibility for relationships and culture was anchored in the development of the principal standards and there was some consistency in the way that relationship building was described. The longer participants reflected on this particular question during the focus group discussion, entry-year assistant principals provided responses that identified the theme of relationship building

and school building culture as their primary responsibility. Participants described the responsibility of an administrator to build effective relationships with all constituents and develop a positive school culture through those relationships. Experienced principals also provided responses in the focus groups that identified relationship building and school culture as amongst their primary responsibilities. The evolution of principal standards at both the national and state levels has stressed the fact that effective principals develop the ability to establish successful interpersonal relationships with various stakeholders. The development of professional standards for educational leaders from ISLLC 1996 through the PSEL standards in 2015, and the most recent revision of the Ohio Standards for Principals 2018, relationship building is viewed as a critical skill for school principals. The ISLLC standards, PSEL, and OPS illustrate that there has always been an attempt to quantify and develop leadership standards to assist in the process of assessing and selecting school leaders, specifically, principals (Wildy et al., 2011). The process is key in developing future principals and preparing viable, competent school leaders for the future (Madden 2008; May 2016).

The process that facilitated the development of each set of standards has grown to incorporate the feedback of practitioners. The identification of relationship building as a primary responsibility of a school leader by the participants in this study reinforces and validates the concepts that drive national and state standards development.

The experienced principal participants had what appeared to be a much easier time identifying their primary responsibilities. They identified building relationships with teachers, community members, and students as a clear principal responsibility. As an extension of that theme, their responsibility to address and manage difficult adults and

disruptive adult behavior was also identified as a responsibility of their position. Participants stressed the importance of a principal having the necessary ability to confront behavior and have difficult conversations with constituents, especially difficult conversations with teaching staff. The perceived effectiveness of school leaders can be tied to their ability to have tough conversations regarding the performance of employees. Those interactions must be directed at continuous improvement and not be perceived as bullying. A necessary part of building that kind of reputation as a leader is tied to the leader's ability to build relationships and the development of credibility.

Experienced principals identified a theme relating to aspects of safety and school building security and crisis preparedness. The emergence of this theme and the number of participants who mentioned it when discussing their primary responsibilities was surprising given all that they are responsible for each day. Safety planning and emergency preparedness dominated participant descriptions of primary responsibilities. Given the wide range of principal responsibilities today, and the focus on the expectation that the principal is the instructional leader, it was striking that safety and references to school shootings and emergency preparedness were so prevalent in the participant responses. Participants described incidents involving students and handguns at school, bomb threats, and social media threats regarding school shootings in their responses. One experienced principal participant was the principal in a public school at a time when an actual shooting happened. The responsibility for school safety was stressed in his descriptions. It was also seen in other participant descriptions as well. It does appear that a principal's responsibility for school safety not only dominates the media landscape

today, but it has supplanted instructional issues as the number one concern for school principals as well.

Perceptions of preparation. Thematically, there were a great number of similarities between the responses of both entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals. The question was asked by the researcher to explore the feelings of each participant in regards to their perceived preparation for the realities of their roles.

Eight of the 10 entry-year participants expressed that they did not feel prepared by either their informal experiences or their formal principal preparation programs for the realities of the assistant principal position. Participants shared that they primarily learned the skills needed for success in their job by doing the job. They stated that they had limited knowledge about the responsibilities of an assistant principal and the stresses associated with the role. It was shared by entry-year assistant principals that they felt that their formal training focused primarily on preparation for the principal position with very little attention on the assistant principal. Two assistant principals shared that they did feel prepared for the realities of their role. These responses appeared specifically referenced to unique roles and experiences in their professional backgrounds that had specific applicability to current professional responsibilities, meaning that they had critical learning experiences that resulted in a level of confidence when assigned duties associated with their current roles. The most defined example of this was familiarity with special education services. Experience in the special education classroom and the IEP process played a role in the confidence level of entry-year assistant principals assigned special education supervision and the administrative role in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting process.

While the input of these two participants appears small in comparison to the eight participants who described feeling unprepared by their formal and informal training, it underpins several concepts explored by this study. The conceptual framework of experiential learning is reinforced by the responses that illustrate that a specific experience in these entry-year assistant principals' backgrounds manifested itself in a level of confidence and competence in the performance of new duties. Also, when faced with the division of administrative responsibilities for their building, the principals who supervised these assistant principals identified an area of specific skill and assigned their daily duties in accordance with their professional strengths. The literature review highlights the observation that the assistant principal role is largely undefined and is often a collection of various duties as assigned by the building principal (Kwan, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; May 2016). Often those duties are comprised of responsibilities that nobody else wants to deal with (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; May, 2016). Unfortunately, things like special education and the IEP process fall into that category. These two assistant principal participants provided circumstances where that practice worked to the benefit of both the entry-year assistant principal and the administrative team.

Seven of the 10 experienced principals also stated in their focus group responses that they did not feel prepared for the realities of their administrative role by either their informal or formal training. They described feeling that only through doing the job did they really grasp the realities of the job. Experienced principals stated that training for the principal position did not truly begin until they were in the job.

Three of the experienced principal participants offered blended responses to this question. They described the perception that they were prepared for the realities of the

role but never really understood the principal position until they occupied it. These participants reflected on training and preparation in specific areas and the confidence associated with those experiences but hedged their answer by adding that they didn't know enough at the time to understand that they really did not completely understand the responsibility and entirety of the principal position.

Entry year “on-the-job” experiences. The overarching theme that emerged from the analysis of both the entry-year assistant principal and experienced principal participants described a crisis event as the most impactful professional growth experience encountered during the entry year. There was a total of seven themes identified across both groups of participants. Six of the seven described different types of crisis events, or in a few cases, events that had the capacity to blossom into crisis events if mishandled.

Entry-year assistant principals provided the most vivid detail in their descriptions of crisis events that they encountered during the year. Whether the participant responses described student deaths by suicide or accident or threats of school violence propagated by graffiti, social media, or community report, the common theme was the entry-year assistant principal's realization that their behavior as a leader directly impacted so many constituents and required coordination with so many different service providers. Another aspect of the described crises was the entry-year principal's description of their principal's behavior. The modeling of leadership skills, especially in the midst of crisis when leaders are often forced to make quick decisions without all of the necessary information or the time to acquire it, left a major impact (James & Wooten, 2010).

The most emotionally charged descriptions provided by experienced principals focused on school safety. Experienced principals have developed an awareness of the

community expectations that they are individually responsible for the safety of the children and staff at their school. While there appear to be many different resources at play in school safety readiness, principals find themselves at least feeling responsible for preparing for what can best be described in many cases as an unpredictable incident. Experiences with events that threaten that safety are described by experienced principals as critical to professional growth (Cowen & Rossen, 2013).

Experienced principals, having the perspective provided by years of experience, provided less detail in their descriptions, instead highlighting entry-year experiences relating to daily duties that have potentially combustible outcomes. They included major student discipline incidents that require participation in the suspension and expulsion process and being a member of a leadership team during a labor management crisis like a teacher strike. Participants described the development of interpersonal skills and competence with contractual and procedural requirements as important entry-year experiences that foster professional growth.

Assigned or spontaneous experience. Following the focus group questions that asked participants to identify entry-year experiences that they felt were impactful in their professional growth, the researcher asked an extension question. After each participant had provided a description of their most impactful experiences, they were asked whether those experiences were associated with their daily set of prescribed job responsibilities or whether the experiences were representative of isolated, episodic crisis or events that fell outside of their daily duties.

There was a noticeable difference in the responses of entry-year assistant principals when compared with experienced principals. Entry-year assistant principals

almost exclusively identified a crisis event as an impactful learning experience that occurred during their entry-year. While they described their daily duties as varied, the experiences that they labeled as impactful to their professional growth were associated with episodic events. Experienced principals provided a little more of a range in their identification of the most impactful entry-year experiences. The participants did identify crisis events as impactful learning experiences in their entry year but also identified developing the ability to handle the seemingly insurmountable workload associated with their role as pivotal as well. Comments by the experienced principals made during the focus groups provided insight to the fact that their awareness of the need for the skills taught by performing what was described as the daily grind, occasionally peppered with a crisis event, was a product of the perspective brought about by experience and reflection. Entry-year assistant principal participants reported that they may still be shell-shocked by the described crisis events.

Mentorship. The question regarding the identification of an individual that entry-year assistant principals considered their mentor was presented to the entry-year assistant principal participants. The findings revealed that entry-year principals overwhelmingly identified their principal as the most influential mentor present during their entry year. This is a logical response given the supervisory responsibilities of the principals described. Assistant principals not only have to serve a wide range of constituents; they have a primary responsibility to support their leadership team and ultimately their principal. While participants described some negative interactions with a principal when answering one of the initial questions in the focus group interview and cited those negatives as a reason to pursue leadership in the first place, the descriptions of their

primary mentors in their current role were positive. Assistant principals also identified their experienced principal mentor assigned through the Beginning Administrator Mentorship Program (BAMA) as influential, and when they were part of a larger administrative team, identified other assistant principals as providing mentorship. The presence of mentors in the workplace provided a setting and relationship within which an entry-year assistant principal could seek advice prior to making decisions as well as practice reflection following an incident or decision. That support and reflection is identified within the field of experiential learning as critical to the development of decision making capacity and improved subsequent outcomes (Kolb, 1984).

Entry year “on-the-job” experiences: The mentor perspective. Earlier in the focus group interviews, experienced principals were asked to reflect back on their own entry year and identify critical learning experiences that provided professional growth in preparation for the principal role. This question shifted the focus and asked the experienced principal participants to think about their current entry-year assistant principal mentees and provide a description of the experiences that they believed entry-year assistant principals today must have. The obvious variable between this question and the previous one is the perspective that years of principal experience provided the participants, and whether there was difference between what they identified as critical in their own entry year compared with what they would prescribe to their mentees today.

The theme first provided by their responses was consistent with the theme that emerged throughout other focus group data, the experiences associated with going through some kind of school crisis. Specifically, the multi-faceted nature of a crisis and the number of constituent groups and community services often associated with a crisis is

an important experience for an entry-year administrator. Experienced principals cited that the awareness of how many aspects of a school and community are impacted by a crisis provided a vivid illustration of the socio-political responsibilities of school leadership.

Another theme identified the responsibility for planning and leading a school event that incorporated public attendance provided an authentic experience with accountability for the school community connection in a way that other synthetic experiences cannot. The opportunity to provide an entry-year assistant principal with this experience is often overlooked by principals as many have a sense of responsibility for these types of events, and the backlash from parents or community members in response to criticism of an event could be difficult for an entry-year professional to bear. While some experienced principals may feel the urge to insulate their entry-year assistants from this kind of high risk-high reward responsibilities, the experience can be an extremely valuable authentic learning opportunity. Andragogy and experiential learning theory place a premium on the learning experiences associated with the presence of risk and ownership for outcomes, especially in the workplace.

Experienced principals also provided descriptions of two other experiences they felt critical for their entry-year administrators. The day-to-day responsibilities associated with student discipline, especially when those duties include suspension and expulsion processes provide critical professional growth opportunities not available in other situations. These experiences are often emotionally charged and involve interactions with students, parents, advocates, lawyers, superintendents and at times, board of education members. When identifying the primary job responsibility of relationship

building and school culture, experienced principals cited the opportunity for entry-year assistant principals to establish consistency, advocacy for all students and the school culture, and the delicate nature of communication in discipline correspondence as a highly valuable experience. The fact that mishandled discipline incidents also have the potential for legal consequences and employment implications makes it all the more of a critical learning experience. Similarly, experienced principals described the critical nature of an entry-year assistant principal having an opportunity to directly supervise some aspect of the professional staff and if required, discipline an employee. These opportunities are also described by principals as highly charged experiences with many moving parts, contractual and codified requirements, and very high stakes for mishandling them. As long as there exists adequate mentorship and coaching through the event, these are both extremely valuable professional growth experiences.

The impact of district typology. As discussed in chapter four, the Ohio Department of Education uses a variety of descriptors when identifying Ohio's Public Schools. One of those indicators is district typology. That typology may indicate whether a district is urban, suburban, rural, or Appalachian. This study incorporated the use of four separate focus groups to ensure that all district types were represented in the research sample. During the focus group, participants were asked to reflect on the question of whether they believe that the typology of a school district impacted the professional development of entry-year school leaders.

The descriptions of the professional growth experiences that entry-year school administrators are exposed to were similar across participant groups. While there was some variance in the way that the differences were described, the common thread

throughout appeared linked to socio-economics and school size as opposed to related to any district type as defined by the Ohio Department of Education. Participants clearly defined similar learning experiences for entry-year administrators regardless of the setting in which they encountered them. Specific differences were associated with the resources available to the leadership team. In the case of smaller schools, resources might refer to the number of principals in a building. The leadership team may only consist of one administrator. In those circumstances, an entry-year administrator may be exposed to a greater number of and wider variety of learning experiences. In a larger building, an entry-year assistant principal may be part of a team with a principal or in some situations, multiple assistant principals. While the professional learning experiences may be similar as described by participants, the mentoring resources and subsequently, the ability for an entry-year assistant principal to seek readily available guidance and peers for reflection may serve to accelerate learning opportunities and definitely provide an opportunity to improve subsequent outcomes based upon that guidance. Participants also referenced financial resources as an impactful factor when looking at entry-year administrators and professional growth. Scarcity of financial resources can add a level of stress not present in all settings, while funds available in other settings may provide additional resources in the form of formalized professional development opportunities like conferences and other professional development resources.

The impact of participant gender on the findings. While not included in the research questions or the focus group questions, any potential impact of participant gender was offered as a side-finding. Within the total number of research study

participants, there were 11 males and 9 females. There were no specific focus group interview questions directed at exploring the impact of participant gender on their described entry-year experiences. One of the female participants noted gender bias in her entry-year experiences. No other participants provided any responses that included any reference to gender. While the feedback from 19 participants did not include experiences, either positive or negative in nature, associated with gender or gender bias, secondary school leadership continues to be a male dominated field and it would be irresponsible to conclude that gender does not play a role in the experiences of women seeking leadership opportunities within their respective schools, access to licensure programs, and mentorship from influential principals, specifically females employed in the principal role. The noted shortage of qualified school leaders and the imperative of developing the next generation of secondary school principals makes the recruitment of entry-year administrators of the highest priority. Addressing any factors, specifically gender-based factors, that may limit the pool from which interested candidates are recruited, namely ignoring any variable that may discourage half of the pool of potential principals, appears grossly irresponsible. Presently, there is a great deal of enthusiasm and energy directed at developing resources for empowering future female school leaders. This represents an area that future research must explore.

Discussion of Themes and Descriptions

The eight constructs explored in the focus group settings provided participant data in the form of transcripts. Those transcripts were analyzed and from that data, specific themes were then identified through the coding process. That process identified thematic

clusters that, when examined collectively, provided eight composite descriptions in response to the research questions.

Research Question 1

Research question number one focused on the responses from entry-year secondary school assistant principals. The data collected through the focus group interview process and the survey instrument were reviewed using the stated data analysis method. While several focus group interview questions directly addressed the research question number one, the entirety of the data collected across all constructs explored and questions asked of the participants cumulatively provided support and detail to the findings in response to the research questions. A review of all data collected from this participant group provided two descriptions of experiences that answered research question number one. The collective examination of the various topics discussed in the focus groups provides a foundation for the discussion of these descriptions.

Crisis events. Entry-year secondary school assistant principals provided descriptions of two types of experiences that they identified as valuable and impactful to their professional growth. The first description was developed by participant experiences with a crisis event. Crisis events are described consistently in the data collected for this study as the most important educational experience that participants had encountered thus far in their careers. The second description was developed from participant experiences with confrontational interactions with a significant stakeholder, typically a parent in response to a student discipline incident.

Andragogy and the field of experiential learning are the cornerstone of all leadership development with specific applicability to the professional growth of assistant

principals preparing for the principal position. (Ciroka, 2015). Kolb (1984) stated that truly impactful learning opportunities must occur embedded in the real world context, in this circumstance, immersed in the entry-year experiences of beginning school administrators.

While a crisis event is the most dominant theme to come from participant descriptions, the information does not easily transfer to the planning of the professional development of assistant principals. This is due to the fact that crisis events cannot be planned as part of the entry-year experience. It was apparent to the researcher that the anxiety and emotional content of facing a crisis as an entry-year administrator had a positive impact on the perceived skills acquired by entry-year assistant principals when interviewed following the experience. Entry-year assistant principals who were able to participate in the leadership of a school building through a crisis event described an accelerated learning curve and what they described as a flooding experience in regard to leadership and trust development. All descriptions included the presence of a mentor figure, typically in the role of their respective principals. Participants described observing their principal lead the building through the incident, communicate with community members, and advocate for and interact with service providers. The entry-year assistants considered “surviving” the crisis an eye-opening experience that provided a crash course in the parts of the assistant principal job that they did not know about before they were in the position.

Confrontational interaction with a stakeholder. The second theme developed from entry-year assistant principal descriptions involved their experiences with what was described as a combustible interaction with a stakeholder. Typically, the stakeholder in

question was an irate parent, showing up at school angry about a student discipline incident involving their child. The participants described interactions where, for the first time, they were the target of parental aggression and confrontation. Entry-year assistant principals stated that these incidents, while still a crisis in many respects, were more frequent than the other school crisis events like a student death or social media threat. Participants described these parental confrontations as an extension of daily student discipline and due to their frequency, assistant principals felt a comfort level and confidence with every incident that they handled. The self-awareness in the participants that successive experiences had improved outcomes, especially when participants had the ability to seek the counsel of an experienced mentor during a reflective process that followed high stress experiences, falls completely in line with the tenets of experiential learning theory. The participants described an authentic sense of surprise the first time that a significant parental conflict happened. They stated that no experiences in their preparation for the position prepared them for the combustible nature of the interaction. Entry-year assistant principals described specific interactions where things may not have gone as well as they had hoped the first few times that they faced them, but described the reflection and coaching that they received from their principals and more experienced peers as a tremendously valuable asset in their development of competence and confidence.

Research Question 2

Research question number two focused on the responses from experienced secondary school principals reflecting on their own experiences during their entry year. The data collected through the focus group interview process and the survey instrument

were reviewed using the stated data analysis process. A review of all data collected from this participant group provided three descriptions of experiences that answered research question number two. The collective examination of the various constructs discussed in the focus groups provided a foundation for the discussion of these descriptions. There were some readily identifiable differences in the way that experienced principals reacted to the focus group question when compared with entry-year assistant principals. The descriptions appeared softened from the high stress, emotionally charged descriptions provided by entry-year assistant principals. Experienced principals provided descriptions of experiences that were much more process oriented and pragmatic. The years of experience in the educational leadership roles obviously provided a perspective that reflected a calm, analytic approach to addressing crisis issues. When experienced principals were asked to reflect on their own entry year and provide descriptions of experiences that they felt provided the greatest level of professional growth as they prepared to advance to the principal role, the data analysis identified three separate experiences.

The student discipline process. The experienced principal descriptions of the mastery of the student discipline process addressed the same underlying aspects of experience provided by entry-year assistant principals, but with a focus on the overall mastery of the process from start to finish as opposed to the focus on the episodic nature of the angry parent flashpoint. Experienced principals appeared to possess a perspective on student discipline issues that referenced the same concerns, but addressed them in a much more systemic way, removing the emotional content and providing focus on the development of mastery in the due process steps involved.

Labor-management function. The identification of participation in a labor-management function as a critical learning experience for entry-year assistant principals was an interesting addition to the data. It appeared to be an area that principals identified as an overlooked arena in their own preparation for the principal role. Participants noted that they were required as a principal to participate in some aspect of management related to collective bargaining and negotiations. The inclusion of this theme communicated their perceived inexperience when faced with the experience and proposed any interaction with the labor-management process as an important experience as they prepared for the principal role. This experience may be more a product of awareness on a shortcoming in their own professional growth during their entry year that has evolved into a belief that current entry-year assistant principals must be exposed to such an experience.

School safety. The final theme, and by far the strongest, to emerge from the data collected from experienced principals in addressing research question number two was the mention of school safety. There were two distinct observations for discussion when examining the data. The nature of a school safety incident has many of the characteristics of the crisis events described by entry-year assistant principal participants when exploring critical educational experiences. In that sense, the school safety incidents described by the experienced principal participants are aligned with the identification of a crisis event possessing the greatest potential for professional growth of entry-year administrators. Adamson and Peacock (2007) reported that nationally 93% of school administrators will experience what is described as a serious crisis event in their schools. Given the range of potential crisis events, the question of why experienced principals

chose school safety incidents as the crisis event of choice is understandable given the current climate of the times in secondary education. The last 20 years have pushed the issue of school shootings and emergency preparedness into the forefront of administrative responsibilities, highlighting the principal's accountability for the physical and emotional safety of students and staff (Cowan & Rossen, 2013). Ultimately, and perhaps unfortunately, the principal is accountable for this aspect of education. The role of a principal, the instructional leader, appears at times, overshadowed by their role as safety officer. In a crisis event, principals must have the ability to respond immediately and be effective (Crepeau-Hobson, Sievering, Armstrong, & Stonis, 2012). The anxiety described by participants in regard to accountability for safety may have colored their responses to the selection of this type of crisis and this theme.

Research Question 3

Research question number three also focused on the responses from experienced secondary school principals. Participants were asked to reflect on their mentorship of entry-year assistant principals. While a focus group interview question directly addressed research question number three, the entirety of the data collected across all constructs explored, and questions asked of the participants, cumulatively provided support and detail to the findings in response to the research question. A review of all data collected from this participant group provided three descriptions of experiences that answered research question number three. The data collected from the experienced principals provided a unique view into their perspectives regarding the preparation of entry-year assistant principals. Experienced principals identified three different types of experiences as critical to the professional growth of entry-year assistant principal mentees.

The crisis event. The crisis event is seen as a high value learning experience for entry-year assistant principals. The specific nature of the crisis event was varied in participant data, but the fundamental aspects of the crisis were consistent. There was an interest expressed by experienced principals to providing entry-year administrators an opportunity to see all of the different facets of a principal's responsibilities in times of crisis. While the primary duties of an assistant principal in such circumstances relate directly to the care and safety of students, there are many moving parts to leadership addressing a crisis event. The experienced principals then stated that there is a responsibility on their part to provide entry-year assistant principals a glimpse into the leadership experience while also protecting them. The anxiety and emotional content of some experiences, especially if an assistant principal has to face them without the support or insulation of a mentor, can have a negative outcome, and the trauma induced as a result of an experience can lead to an entry-year administrator leaving the role or the field.

Labor-management conflict. The second experience described also fits into the definition of crisis event. Experienced principals felt that an entry-year assistant principal should experience a labor-management dispute of some kind. Specifically, they should be exposed to the process of disciplining an employee. While the building principal is often the direct supervisor and responsible for employee discipline, experienced principals cited situations where an entry-year assistant should be placed in a direct leadership role that requires evaluation of certified or classified staff. The experience of providing an employee feedback regarding an incident or their performance has specific professional development benefits as entry-year assistant principals prepare

for the principal role. Experienced principal participant responses indicated specific value if the situation involves a combative labor union representative and specific contract language governing employee discipline. Participants stated that entry-year assistant principals are often not exposed to these types of experiences. Participating in employee discipline, especially if the situation is emotionally charged, has specific value to professional growth.

Facilitating a large public event. The third theme addressed in the responses of experienced principals providing descriptions of critical job-embedded experiences that facilitate professional growth for entry-year assistant principals involves the entry-year administrator being placed in charge of planning and facilitating a large public event for the school. The experienced principal participants reflected on the fact that entry-year assistant principals need to be provided experiences where they develop a first-hand awareness of the socio-political aspects of schools. The community connections present in a large public event and the accountability for planning and supervising such an event has many positive professional growth opportunities. The accountability for an event can create the necessary anxiety associated with the fallout of a failed event and provides an opportunity to receive feedback from the constituents who tend to provide critical feedback following events. Experienced principals noted that it is very difficult to simulate the stress associated with a high stakes experience like this and their responses to this focus group question also stressed on-the-job experience as the only way to truly learn the skills associated with such an aspect of school leadership.

Experienced principal participants described the necessity that, while a number of critical job-embedded experiences are going to occur naturally in the course of doing the

job, an experienced principal, acting in the role of mentor, has a responsibility for the professional development of entry-year assistant principals and must purposefully assign experiences directed at professional growth.

The responses to research question number three must be examined closely based on one pivotal finding of this study. The descriptions of critical educational experiences provided by entry-year assistant principals included references to experienced principals, either in the role of mentor or direct supervisor, who provided guidance through impactful experiences. Supported by the fields of andragogy and experiential learning, the process by which a learner, in the case of this study, entry-year assistant principals, participates in guided reflection following an experience, greatly improves learner performance in successive experiences. An experienced principal who acts as a mentor or supervisor has a responsibility for fostering and coaching an entry-year administrator through that reflective process. Therefore, the feedback provided in the research study data analyzed for the purpose of answering research question number three must be valued.

Limitations

Replicability is a fundamental concern with phenomenological qualitative research, due in large part to the fact that the study of how human beings describe an experience is unique and contextually anchored (Giorgi, 2012; Mohajan, 2018; Simon, 2011; Yin, 2011). This study relied upon the focus group as a data collection tool with multiple participants responding to the same question. While there is consistency in the protocol, it is dependent on the participant to share their unique perspective on the question being asked.

An established pool of potential participant candidates was used in the sampling process; however, there may be difficulty in generalizing the findings beyond the borders of the initial pool of participants (Simon, 2011). The sample may not be considered random and introduces the motives of the participants who chose to respond. In addition, there is a tremendous amount of variance when we look at the unique attributes of each region, district, school, staff, and relationships that the participants' experience is based in. There are over 600 school districts in the State of Ohio and therefore the potential for over 600 different contexts within which participant experience occurs (ODE, 2018). In addition to the variance in context, the differences in individual participant background, educational experience, personality, and temperament, as well as the unique aspects of crisis and periods of socio-political upheaval in their individual workplace setting may impact the descriptions of participant experience (Mohajan, 2018).

The researcher drew a sample of 20 research study participants from the identified participant pools for the focus groups. There is a question if the sample was large enough to provide the researcher with the ability to generalize the findings to a larger population.

The nature of phenomenological research relies upon the participants describing their individual experiences with the targeted phenomenon; however, the researcher must acknowledge that participant descriptions of their experiences represent a moment in time, filtered through their current context (Giorgi, 2012; Mohajan, 2018). That context may be influenced by the time of year, fatigue level of participants, current employment situation, or their emotional perspective of their job.

Qualitative research requires an acknowledgement that the researcher brings a set of preconceived perspectives and bias into the research setting (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). This study examined the critical job-embedded experiences that secondary school assistant principals encounter during their entry year that yield the highest level of professional growth as they prepare for advancement to the principal role.

The researcher places a high value on the concept of professional mentoring within the field of education. Education is a field rich in professional development programs and opportunities, and administrators new to the leadership role have a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional training opportunities available. It is the researcher's assertion that there is not a more powerful tool for the professional development of an entry-year administrator than a quality principal who provides ongoing, sustained, daily modeling and guidance embedded in the workplace.

Subsequently, one of the most influential factors in the professional development of an administrator is the quality of, and purposeful leadership by, an experienced leader.

The current professional role of the researcher requires daily interaction with secondary administrators across the State of Ohio in a significant number of professional development activities for secondary school administrators. This research is in the area of leadership development of secondary school assistant principals in preparation for the principal role. The researcher must reflect on issues that have the potential to influence the findings of this study. The researcher needs to be aware of any projection of perspectives and biases onto the focus group responses of participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

An analysis of the steps involved in the preparation of a school leader, namely a secondary school principal, reveals a confusing path. A secondary level teacher, who demonstrates the skills and initiative necessary to pursue a formal leadership position,

chooses a post-graduate principal licensure program. They enroll, complete the course requirements, then successfully accomplish all of the other steps necessary to acquire a secondary principal license. At this point in the process, they interview and secure their first secondary school administrative position, typically in the role of assistant principal.

This pathway has inherent flaws. The first is the reality that principal licensure programs, as cited in the literature review are primarily directed at the development of individual educators for the principal position, specifically as an instructional leader. That poses a challenge if most secondary principals begin their administrative careers in the assistant principal position. The assistant principal position appears to be one of the most nebulous job descriptions in the field of education, with a number of duties and responsibilities that researchers place in excess of 140. When faced with a set of duties that they were clearly not prepared to do, assistant principals must find a way to survive the entry year and continue to grow professionally, building a resume that will facilitate their candidacy for the next step, the building principal position. The variability in the structure of the post-graduate principal preparation program, as described by research participants, was evident. Future research must take a deeper look at the structure and methods incorporated in principal licensure programs. Specifically, the use of case studies and authentic scenarios as instructional tools, and the prevalence of the use of the cohort model should be conducted. To better understand the nature of the academic experiences that are the pathway to licensure will naturally lead to program improvement. When entry-year secondary schools and experienced principals describe dissatisfaction with their respective licensure program in regards to their perceived level of preparation

for the realities of their current position, a closer examination of those programs can provide valuable data to inform program development.

A portion of the focus group interview asked participants to describe their individual pathway to the principalship. Participants identified their involvement with informal teacher leadership responsibilities as a common component in their respective pathways towards a decision to pursue school administration. The identification of these teacher leadership roles as influential factors in participant decisions to seek principal licensure warrants further study. It raises the question of whether individuals who seek out teacher leadership responsibilities naturally ascend to leadership positions within teaching ranks, or does participation in the teacher leadership role, perhaps at the encouragement of an administrative mentor, facilitate their initiative to pursue principal licensure.

Additional recommendations for future research include a more in-depth study of the transition timeline from teacher to assistant principal to principal. This information can assist in an understanding of how the transitions happen and serve to improve the internship experiences available to principal licensure candidates. If many new recipients of principal licensure begin their careers in the assistant principal role, specific coursework and attention should be paid to understanding the position and preparing candidates for those experiences.

Summative Discussion and Implications of This Study

The purpose of this research study was to use the principles of andragogy and experiential learning to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the educational experiences that contribute to the development of the skills necessary for

secondary school assistant principals to advance successfully to the principalship. Within the conceptual framework, the focus group process, research questions and protocols, and survey instrument sought to identify, describe, and validate the specific educational and job-embedded professional growth experiences of the secondary public-school assistant principal. The findings of this study provided several important discussion points.

Both entry-year secondary school assistant principal and experienced secondary school principal participants definitively identified the on-the-job experiences that occur during the entry year as the most impactful professional growth experiences that a school leader can encounter. Participants stated that there is no synthetic way to truly capture the entirety of an entry-year experience in the principal preparation programs that precede an administrator's entrance into the position. The participants in this study clearly identified the experience of a school-based crisis as a critical professional growth opportunity for entry-year assistant principals. The rich, vivid descriptions of research study participant experiences dealing with student discipline and violence, student suicide, emotional trauma, social media threats of violence, teenage alcohol and drug use, as well as combative, threatening parents all encountered during their entry-year, not only provided a glimpse into the causal factors for the current rates of leadership attrition, but also highlighted the difficulty facing pre-service principal preparation programs. Participants described their initial shock at the experiences that assistant principals deal with on a daily basis. Surprisingly, regardless of the number of years that participants worked in the teaching role, they described the eye-opening nature of actually performing the assistant principal job. Providing a glimpse into the real world of secondary school leadership would be a valuable addition to principal preparation. However, crisis is

unpredictable and while all entry-year assistant principal participants and experienced principal participants were readily able to provide details regarding personal workplace experiences associated with a crisis, the number of variables involved would make it unrealistic to attempt to responsibly capture the critical aspects and simulate it during a clinical internship. Additionally, participants described discovering the socio-political connections embedded within a school leader's responsibilities. The nature and connection of crisis events and incidents that impact school culture has a ripple effect that impacts not only the standing of the school within its respective community, but the perception of the effectiveness of school leadership. Participants in both groups described the necessity of entry-year administrators developing an awareness of the connections to the community.

Throughout the findings, one variable continued to emerge in participant descriptions of critical educational experiences. Both entry-year assistant principals and experienced principals described the influential presence of a mentor in the workplace. These influential individuals were almost exclusively the principal of the building responsible for the assignment of daily duties and the supervision of participants during their entry year. Research participants described the presence of such a mentor as a highly impactful aspect of the described learning experiences. Mentors provided guidance through new experiences, feedback following performance of job responsibilities, but most importantly, facilitated the important step of reflection after an incident. The reflection that follows an experience permits a learner to develop conclusions about the experience, and through these conclusions, a learner is able to competently and actively experiment within subsequent experiences to improve outcomes

(Kolb, 1984). Through this process, or cycle, as Kolb calls it, learners are able to generalize and improve upon the application of learned material within a range of new experiences (Kolb, 1984). Given the stressful nature of many entry-year experiences, the presence of a mentor to assist with the process of reflection is an important ingredient to making these experiences true learning opportunities and not a pathway to the decision to quit.

The entry-year assistant principal and experienced principal participants also provided data regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of the post-graduate principal preparation and licensure programs that they experienced. Interestingly, the experienced principal participants completed their programs and received principal licensure many years ago, in some cases decades ago. While the entry-year assistant principal participants finished their programs in the last two years. Despite the gap in years between both sets of participants finishing their preparation programs and the changes in the professional standards for principals, there were remarkable similarities between the groups regarding the aspects of their programs that they felt were impactful, and the aspects that fell short.

The evolution of professional standards for educational leaders, from the first drafts of the 1996 ISLLC standards through the 2015 PSEL standards, has included the purposeful inclusion and expansion of practitioner involvement in the development of the standards by which we assess and define effective leadership practices. Post-graduate principal preparation and licensure programs must continue to follow this path. There has been a shift in the design and implementation of the curricular approaches in these programs to include an expanded use of case studies as a valuable instructional material

and the inclusion of current practitioners as post-graduate instructors. The description of valuable educational experiences provided in the responses of research study participant data reinforces the need for principal preparation programs to continue these practices. Participants placed high value on educational experiences delivered by principal licensure programs when the programs used the cohort model. The relationships and learning described by participants who experienced coursework delivered to a set cohort of learners in similar settings and situations, accelerated learning and resulted not only in skill acquisition, but the development of authentic professional relationships upon which beginning administrators relied for advice and support.

Educational leadership has not fully constructed or maintained a strategic approach to authentic leadership development. There needs to be initiative toward formally analyzing what has happened when a competent principal is developed. What specific variables or specific experiences played a role in that development? Then, a more strategic view of how it can be replicated needs to happen.

There has been a recent call for a change to the status quo of principal preparation and licensure program design (Roach et al., 2011). An examination of current preparation and licensure programs undergoing revision to meet the needs of the next generation of school leaders has revealed a new sense of dedication and an intent focus on building the bridge from the classroom experiences available to a teacher to programming designed to build an authentic understanding of the leadership operations and responsibilities of the principal. In the past, structured principal preparation programs looked to identify a specific set of skills that can be easily quantified, adequately described, and converted into individual finite skills, that unfortunately, when

immersed in the day-to-day grind of school function are, by necessity and scarcity of resource, often boiled down to the least common denominator of pragmatic strategies, with the intent of developing basic managerial skills. A new understanding of leadership development can stress the importance that experiences delivered in principal preparation programs are organizationally useful and focused on providing real growth opportunities that ensure that candidates are exposed to field experiences that involve a high level of rigor and school change initiatives (Fullan, 2007). The value of the cohort model is becoming increasingly evident, and whether through physical in-person contact or electronic means, the importance of post-experience reflection between individuals preparing for educational leadership is stressed in programming. The cohort provides participants access to the contextual variance available through the sharing of pre-service experiences. When participants can share the major lessons learned from an experience, the cohort as a whole can be strengthened.

The findings of this study clearly identify the use of case studies and authentic problem-solving activities, in cooperation with current practitioners as facilitators, as critical curricular tools in principal licensure coursework and pivotal professional growth experiences for school leaders. When participants identify curricular experiences and materials as based in the reality of the role for which they are preparing, the experiences are, as seen in the research participant descriptions, more impactful.

Within the data collected for this study, there was an interesting comparison drawn by both entry-year assistant principal and experienced principal participants, describing the differences between their undergraduate teacher licensure clinical experiences and their principal licensure clinical experiences. Participants described

completing their student teaching experience feeling like they had developed a true understanding of what the teaching role was truly like. McKim et al. (2013) observed that student teaching involves purposefully designed growth experiences that allow the participant to actively engage in authentic tasks and be responsible for the outcomes. Study participants described being in a student-teacher role where they encountered a series of purposefully designed, real-life, experiences under the trusting mentorship of a supervising teacher. Research indicated that this model produces individuals who have the highest probability of professional growth and subsequently becoming successful teachers (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Rivkin et al. 2005). Participants described the opposite feeling when completing their principal clinical experiences, stating that they felt unprepared for the role that they discovered once in the workplace as an assistant principal. Student-teachers are immersed in the teaching role full time and have access to all aspects of the job. Principal licensure candidates find themselves with very limited access to the role as most are teaching full time and are required to complete large portions of their clinical experiences either during after school hours, or on a single school day through the use of personal leave. Research participants recognized the inherent challenges to accomplishing a replication of the student teaching model for principal licensure internships but suggested the positive impact on learning that would result from an expansion of similar, clinical experiences for aspiring principals.

However, one consistent flaw continues to emerge in the analysis of participant experiences associated with post-graduate principal preparation and licensure programs. When examining the career pathway of the secondary school principal, most individuals who secure principal licensure enter educational leadership as a secondary school

assistant principal. If the professional pathway to the secondary school principal position goes through the assistant principal position and it is considered the most fertile ground for the development of the next generation of school principals, a better understanding of the competencies that the position requires is critical to the future of educational leadership. The role of the assistant principal is described by researchers as largely undefined and subsequently, the necessary professional development directed at preparing individuals for the assistant principal position is largely undefined (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Participants in this study reinforced the necessity of providing specific growth experiences directed at the role of assistant principal.

There appears to be a discernable gap between the completion of principal licensure programs and the principal position. The research indicates that this gap is most often occupied by an individual occupying the assistant principal position (Armstrong 2004; Chan et al., 2003; Denmark & Davis 2000; Winter, 2002). The findings of this study clearly place a premium on the educational experiences available during the entry-year. The period that an administrator occupies the assistant principal position must be viewed as a specific window of time in which critical professional development experiences, unavailable in the principal licensure continuum, must take place. Kolb (1984) identifies the reflection cycle as a necessary component of experiential learning. The time spent in the assistant principal position provides a tailor-made setting for the reflection cycle to take place. The professional standards and policy at the state and national level must recognize the critical nature of the time spent in the assistant principal position and incorporate recommendations and requirements for the assistant principal and the entry-year.

This study should provide a starting point to understanding the experiences described by participants as critical educational experiences. This understanding provides a defined set of experiences that both formal principal preparation programming should provide, and experienced principals should take note of. Given the appropriate pre-service training, educational and job-embedded experiences and competent, purposeful mentorship, candidates for principal positions successfully make the transition to those leadership roles. However, not all assistant principals are prepared to take the next step and be effective. The question at hand is, if all individuals who acquire principal licensure and have displayed the fundamental skills required to access the entry level position of assistant principal, what specific learning experiences separate those that develop into competent, confident principal candidates, and those who flounder in the job and subsequently stagnate or vacate the position? Understanding what these learning experiences are and how to provide access to them will assist in both the development of future principals and has the potential to stem the attrition of those that feel unprepared and overwhelmed.

The findings of this research study should serve to inform the process of authentic leadership development by examining the specific experiences that entry-year assistant principals and experienced principal practitioners have described firsthand. In addition, a review of recent literature does provide some solid starting points. The more authentic experiences a principal has during their formative years, in this case while occupying the entry-year assistant principal position, the more capacity for effective leadership they develop (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2009; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). If, for the purposes of this study, we define the formative years for a

secondary school principal as the years spent in the secondary assistant principal role, then the experiences provided to assistant principals have a tremendous capacity for impact on their development of leadership skills.

Therefore, within the foundational tenets of the theoretical framework identified in this study, exposing entry-year assistant principals to authentic job-embedded experiences, facilitating reflection on those experiences, and providing support throughout a learning process that has natural consequences and outcomes, facilitates the professional growth of entry-year assistant principals as experiential learning is the cornerstone of all leadership development (Kolb, 1984).

The descriptions generated by an analysis of the data gathered for this study provides a roadmap to the educational and job-embedded experiences of assistant principals that facilitate the professional growth necessary to advance to the principal position and be effective. This is critical data for those responsible for the design and delivery of the coursework and internship requirements in post-graduate principal licensure programs. It is also of vital importance to the principals in the field who find themselves in the position of mentor to entry-year assistant principals. The findings of this research study hold specific and immediate value for current secondary school principals as they provide that mentorship and supervision to their assistant principals.

The shortage of qualified school leaders available for open secondary school principal positions, combined with the accelerated rate of attrition from principals currently employed, requires renewed attention to the factors involved in the professional development of entry-year administrators (Blackman, & Fenwick, 2000; Superville, 2014; Thompson, 2010). Superville (2014) stated that nearly half of all newly hired

principals leave the position by their third year, citing that they felt unprepared for the realities and responsibilities associated with the principal role. The findings of this study may serve to stem future attrition by identifying and prescribing critical educational experiences available to beginning administrators in those formative years. Ensuring that entry-year secondary school assistant principals feel more prepared for the realities of the job through participation in experiences designed to raise their awareness and confidence should have a direct effect on the rates of attrition.

The process of developing the next generation of secondary school principals is an imperative. It is an imperative that requires a purposeful identification of critical learning opportunities for entry-year administrators followed by providing exposure to those learning experiences in both the post-graduate principal licensure program and in the workplace. The nature of education today, with a myriad of accountability measures, burgeoning societal pressures, shoestring budgets, exhausting work hours, and conservative scrutiny of public employee salaries, has made the recruitment, development, and retention of talented principals a critical mission.

The field of education is at a crossroads. An ambivalence to the position of assistant principal and the experiences that contribute to their professional growth concedes to the fact that the secondary principal will eventually become a position that either nobody wants, or one that nobody is prepared for. The mechanisms and approaches currently in place will continue to churn out school leaders, whether they are truly ready or not.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR EXPERIENCED PRINCIPALS

The professional development of tomorrows school building leaders is an area of study that I believe is crucial to the future of public education. I am the Associate Executive Director of the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators. I am also a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Youngstown State University. My dissertation topic is a study of the professional development of entry-year secondary school assistant principals. The goal of my research is to explore the specific job embedded experiences of those entry year assistant principals to identify the experiences that have the greatest impact on their professional growth as they prepare for advancement to the principal position.

You are receiving this invitation to participate in the research study and focus group process because you are an experienced secondary school principal in an Ohio public school and have specific characteristics identified by the research questions. By participating in the study, you have the opportunity to share experiences from your own entry-year as well as your experience providing mentorship and/or supervision to entry-year assistant principals. Your contributions to research regarding the experiences of assistant principals and the preparation of principals is invaluable. All data gathered will be kept confidential and every effort will be made to keep all personally identifying information regarding the participants confidential. This invitation is to recruit two separate focus groups with 5 participants per group.

I will be conducting the focus groups for the purpose of collecting the data for the study. The focus groups will be held on the morning of X/XX/19 at the OASSA offices in Columbus, Ohio. My goal is to be sensitive to your busy schedules and have set a 90-minute time limit for each focus group.

If you are willing to participate in my research study and participate in a focus group, please respond to this email. If you have any questions, or need any additional information before making a decision, please feel free to contact me at (614) 430-8311.

Thank You,

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR ENTRY-YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

The professional development of tomorrows school building leaders is an area of study that I believe is crucial to the future of public education. I am the Associate Executive Director of the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators. I am also a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Youngstown State University. My dissertation topic is a study of the professional development of entry-year secondary school assistant principals. The goal of my research is to explore the specific job embedded experiences of those entry year assistant principals to identify the experiences that have the greatest impact on their professional growth as they prepare for advancement to the principal position.

You are receiving this invitation to participate in the research study and focus group process because you are an entry-year secondary school assistant principal in an Ohio public school and have specific characteristics identified by the research questions. By participating in the study, you have the opportunity to share your experiences first hand. Your contributions to research regarding the experiences of assistant principals and the preparation of principals is invaluable. All data gathered will be kept confidential, and every effort will be made to keep all personally identifying information regarding the participants confidential. This invitation is to recruit two separate focus groups with 5 participants per group.

I will be conducting the focus groups for the purpose of collecting the data for the study. The focus groups will be held on the morning of X/XX/19 at the OASSA offices in Columbus, Ohio. My goal is to be sensitive to your busy schedules and have set a 90-minute time limit for each focus group.

If you are willing to participate in my research study and participate in a focus group, please respond to this email. If you have any questions, or need any additional information before making a decision, please feel free to contact me at (614) 430-8311.

Thank You,

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

TITLE OF STUDY

From Rookie to All Star: Identifying Critical Workplace Experiences in a School Principal's Professional Development.

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR

Timothy Freeman
XXX'

Doctoral Candidate
Youngstown State University
XXX

DISSERTATION CHAIR

Dr. Jane Beese
1 University Plaza
Youngstown, OH 44555
Youngstown State University
(330) 941-3000 x2236
jbeese@ysu.edu

[@att.net](mailto:xxx@att.net)

PURPOSE OF STUDY

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to explore the personal and professional experiences of entry-year secondary school assistant principals related to both their formal and informal preparation for undertaking the principal role.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Prior to the start of the focus group, participants will receive a demographic information sheet, seeking some basic information. Participants will be asked to fill it out.

Participants are free to omit any response on the demographic sheet that they are uncomfortable answering without any question by the researchers.

The focus group will begin with the researchers explaining the purpose and format of the activity. The researcher will act as facilitator, asking pre-scripted questions and allowing responses from participants in no particular order. The researcher will take detailed notes and will use a digital recording device.

Participant responses to each question will be permitted to continue until there is no further reply or the topic is exhausted. The researcher may make reflective statements to ensure an understanding of the reply or may ask extension or clarifying questions for the purpose of seeking clarification of responses.

The initial time commitment required by the participants begins with the completion of the demographic information sheet and participation in the focus group discussion not to exceed 90 minutes in length.

The focus group will incorporate the use of digital recording equipment that will be used solely by the researcher to transcribe participant responses. Following completion of the focus group, participants will receive a copy of the transcript of their specific responses in the focus group and will have the opportunity to confirm and, if necessary, clarify their responses before the researcher proceeds with data analysis.

You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

BENEFITS

Each participant has had individual experience with the preparation for the principal role. Participation in this study will provide valuable insight into the experiences identified as critical to the preparation of secondary school principals. There will be no direct monetary benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this study may advance the field of research available to inform the design of graduate programs in educational leadership, mentorship programs and the preparation of tomorrow's secondary school leaders.

RISKS

Your participation in this study will not present any risks greater than you would encounter on any typical work day, or at any professional meeting. Participants are reminded that, while all participants are asked to respect the confidentiality of other participant responses, the researcher cannot control what other participants might share outside of the focus group setting when the interview is completed. The risks for participating are therefore considered minimal, however, participants are cautioned regarding the potential for negative consequences based upon their participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Although every effort will be made to ensure the confidentiality of focus group data, there is no way to completely assure participants that other study participants will not share information outside of the focus group. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Requesting that all participants respect the confidentiality of the focus group data.
- Assigning numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents
- Keeping notes, transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information secured in the personal possession of the researcher.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Services at YSUIRB@ysu.edu or (330) 941-2377.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the personal or professional relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

CONSENT STATEMENTS:

I understand that the information shared by participants during the focus group interviews is confidential and I will respect the privacy of all participants by maintaining that confidentiality, and not sharing any views, comments, or information outside of the focus group setting.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

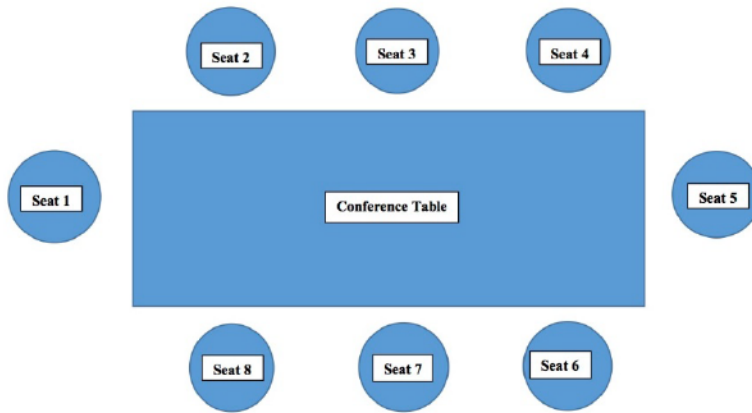
I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that a digital recording device will be used for data collection during the focus group. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX D

RESEARCH FOCUS GROUP SEATING CHART



APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

Research Focus Group (A B C D)

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Marital Status:

School:

Number of Years in Current Role:

Number of Years in Administration:

Number of Years in Education:

Researcher use only:

Seat Number:

Assigned Participant Number:

APPENDIX F

ANDRAGOGY AND ADULT LEARNING THEORY SCRIPT

The researcher will read aloud:

The study of how assistant principals acquire the skills necessary to advance to the principal role and succeed requires an understanding of the learning processes at work when examining adult professionals. This study is designed to examine the professional growth of assistant principals by looking at them as adult learners through the theoretical frameworks provided by Malcolm Knowles' *Theory of Andragogy* (1970), and David Kolb's *Theory of Experiential Learning* (1984).

Andragogy is defined as the "art and science of adult learning". These researchers state that the process of learning is different for adults than it is for children, that adults are self-directed learners, involved as active participants in, and ultimately responsible for, the learning outcomes of the experiences that they undertake. Andragogy states, that as a person matures, they compile a collection of life experiences that future learning is enhanced when a learner has accumulated a larger and wider range of experiences and is able to improve subsequent outcomes based upon the number of trials in their experience. Child learners often learn skills that will be required later in life, like geometry or balancing a checkbook. Adult learners who purposefully engage in learning tasks, do so because there is an immediate need for the skills resulting from success in the learning experience.

Adult learners are self-directed, and that self-direction requires active involvement. Assistant principals are the epitome of self-directed. One study identified one hundred and forty different job responsibilities performed by assistant principals.

With so much to be responsible for, assistant principals absolutely must demonstrate the ability to be self-directed and proactive in assuming responsibility for their work and growth.

Researcher David Kolb stated that “Learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. Kolb proposed a model wherein learner experience is followed by a process of reflection. The reflection that follows an experience leads a learner to develop personal conclusions about the experience, and it is through these drawn conclusions that a learner is able to competently and actively experiment within subsequent experiences to improve subsequent outcomes. Through this process, or cycle, as Kolb calls it, adult learners are able to make newly learned skills generalizable and permanent.

Adult learning requires that activities must be authentic, embedded in functional activities, and learning new skills while immersed in the workplace as opposed to engaging in learning activities that are synthetic, provides more effective adult learning. In other words, learning and professional development are accelerated and most impactful when they occur in the context of real-world experience.

Adult learning theory supports the paradigm that, when a beginning administrator is immersed in the assistant principal role, provided a series of purposefully designed authentic experience embedded within their real-life, day to day function, under the mentorship of an experienced principal with whom they have developed a positive relationship, they should also have the highest probability of acquiring and refining new knowledge, developing and generalizing critical skills, and becoming successful leaders.

APPENDIX G

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. The setting for the focus groups will be a large conference room containing a rectangular conference table with 10 seats (4 along each side, and 1 at each end-see diagram in APPENDIX D). The researcher's materials will consist of stacked forms, a tablet for field notes, several pens, and a digital recording device. The materials will be stacked at the end of the table in front of one of the end seats. Refreshments will be provided on an adjacent table.
2. As each participant arrives at the conference room, the researcher meets each participant at the door, welcomes them, introduces themselves, invites them to help themselves to refreshments, and invites them to take any open seat at the table.
3. When all participants have arrived and are seated, the researcher will thank all participants for their willingness to participate in the focus group activity. The researcher then confirms that all participants received the Informed Consent document (Appendix C) via email and brought the document with them as directed in the email. The researcher will have extra copies available in case any participant forgot to bring it. The Informed consent document will include a description of the study including the focus group, member checking steps, and survey instrument.
4. The researcher will then ask if any of the participants have any questions regarding the document. Any questions will be answered by the researcher. The researcher will then review and read aloud the two consent statements at the bottom of the Informed Consent document. Specific attention will be paid to the Consent statement requesting confidentiality of participant responses. The researcher will then ask each participant to

sign and date the Informed Consent document below each statement and will collect them.

5. After the Informed Consent document is collected, the researcher will pass out a short demographic information sheet (Appendix E) and ask that each participant fill in the requested information and pass it to the end of the table when complete.

6. As each demographic sheet is completed, the researcher will enter the seat location of each subject on the sheet and assign a random participant number.

7. The researcher will then ask each participant to introduce themselves, briefly share their professional background, and identify their current professional position. The introductions are designed to provide a level of comfort to the subjects and build rapport.

8. The researcher will then review the purpose of the study, explaining that the focus group questions are intended to explore the professional development of entry-year assistant principals. The researcher will then read aloud a brief summary of Andragogy and Adult Learning theory (APPENDIX F).

9. The researcher will notify the participants that 12 separate focus group questions will be asked. The participants will be informed that there will be no set rotation or turn-taking, allowing for any participant who wishes to reply to specific questions the ability and freedom to do so. The researcher will state that participants are not required to respond to every question, however, the researcher will not move on to the next question until either, each participant has an opportunity to contribute, or the topic is exhausted. The researcher will then remind participants that the data collected will be most valuable if it is open and honest, and that while every attempt will be made by the researcher to protect the confidentiality of the data collected, it is incumbent on the participants to

respect the confidentiality of the information shared by other research participants. The researcher will state that there may be negative impact for participants if comments made in the focus group are shared outside of the focus group setting.

10. The researcher will also state that additional extension questions would be asked only for the purpose of clarifying responses. The researcher will alert the focus group when they will be moving on to the next question.

11. The researcher will then ask if any participant has any questions prior to starting the focus group questioning. Any questions will be answered.

12. At this time, participants will be notified that the digital recording device is being turned on and that the researcher would also begin taking notes.

13. The focus group interview will then proceed with the researcher asking the series of 12 scripted questions and allowing spontaneous responses from subjects. (APPENDIX H) contains the 12 questions used for Focus Groups A and B; (APPENDIX I) contains the 12 questions used for Focus Groups C and D.

14. As stated in the Informed Consent document, the researcher will alert the group when the allotted 90-minute time limit was reached, or when all questions have been asked and responded to. The researcher will then notify the participants that the recording device will be turned off and notetaking would stop.

15. The researcher will then explain that accuracy in the data collected at the focus group is critical. The researcher will inform the participants that the digital recording of the focus group would be transcribed and that each participant would receive a written copy of their input via email. The participants would be asked to review the written copy of their comments upon receipt and respond via email to the researcher with either: 1) a

confirmation that the written copy was an accurate record of their comments and intent, or 2) any revisions, additions, or clarifications to the transcript.

16. The researcher then thanked all focus group participants for their time and input and escorted the group from the conference room.

17. The researcher will then return to the conference room and prepare the setting for the next group. Two focus groups will be conducted each day with a one-hour space of time placed between the two scheduled focus groups permitting the researcher to organize research materials and set up for the next group.

APPENDIX H

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS- A/B

Section 1: The Path to the Principalship

1. Describe the professional path you took to become a secondary school principal.
2. Can you identify a motivating factor or an individual person in your life that influenced you to pursue becoming a secondary school principal? Can you describe that factor or person?
3. You each completed the graduate coursework for principal licensure. What parts of that program prepared you well for the realities of the principal role? What parts did not?

Section 2: Critical Experiences-Self

Please respond to the next set of questions reflecting on your own personal experience.

4. What do you perceive to be the most important responsibility of a secondary school principal?
5. In your preparation for the principal role, do you believe that your training, both formally and informally, prepared you for those “most important responsibilities”?
6. Tell me a little about critical “on the job experiences” that you encountered in your first year in administration and how those experiences assisted in your preparation for the principal role.
7. Of the “on the job experiences” that we just talked about, can you identify any that you consider the most critical in terms of your own professional development?

Section 3: Critical Experiences-Entry-Year Assistant Principals

You all are currently working with entry-year administrators in a mentoring capacity and may have supervised entry-year assistant principals in your own building. The following questions are directed at your experience working with them.

8. Reflecting on the experiences that an entry-year assistant principal encounters during their first year, can you identify any experiences that you consider the most valuable in-regards to their professional growth?
9. Can you tell me a little about each experience and why you identify it as most valuable?
10. Were these experiences that you described the result of a specifically assigned task, or was each one a naturally occurring, spontaneous event that they faced in the performance of their duties?

School District Typology:

11. In regards to the professional development of school leaders, what unique advantages are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?
12. In regards to the professional development of school leaders, what unique challenges are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?

APPENDIX I

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS- C/D

Section 1: The Path to the Principalship

1. Describe the professional path you took to become a secondary school principal.
2. Can you identify a motivating factor or an individual person in your life that influenced you to pursue becoming a secondary school principal? Can you describe that factor or person?
3. You each completed the graduate coursework for principal licensure. What parts of that program prepared you well for the realities of the principal role? What parts did not?

Section 2: Critical Experiences-Self

Please respond to the next set of questions reflecting on your own personal experiences this year.

4. What do you perceive to be the most important responsibility of a secondary school principal?
5. In your preparation for the principal role, do you believe that your training, both formally and informally, is preparing you for those “most important daily responsibilities”?
6. Do you have a mentor or more experienced administrator upon who you rely for guidance? Who is that person?
7. Tell me a little about “on the job experiences” that you encountered in your first year in the assistant principal role and how you believe those experiences assist in your preparation for the principal role.
8. Of the “on the job experiences” that we just talked about, can you identify any that you consider the most critical in terms of your own personal or professional development?
9. Can you tell me a little about each experience and why you identify it as most valuable?
10. Were these experiences that you described the result of a specifically assigned task, or was each one a naturally occurring, spontaneous event that you faced in the performance of your duties?

School District Typology:

11. In regards to the professional development of school leaders, what unique advantages are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?
12. In regards to the professional development of school leaders, what unique challenges are presented by the type of district that you work in (Urban-Suburban / Rural-Appalachian)?

APPENDIX J
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The survey instrument will be sent via email to all 78 experienced secondary school principals in participant candidate pools A and B, and to all 51 entry-year secondary school assistant principals in participant candidate pools C and D. Each recipient will be informed that all responses to the survey were used for data analysis purposes and that no identifiable personal data will be used.

Below the opening paragraph, the survey will provide each research question followed by the thick, comprehensive descriptions authored by the researcher following the analysis of the data from the focus groups. Those descriptions will be followed by a Likert scale displaying a scale of 1 (Do Not Agree) through 5 (Completely Agree).

Dear _____,

You are receiving this email as part of a research study examining the professional growth of entry-year assistant principals. Please take a moment to read the following paragraphs and complete the survey.

The purpose of this study is to explore the personal and professional experiences of entry-year secondary school assistant principals related to both their formal and informal preparation for undertaking the principal role. The study of how assistant principals acquire the skills necessary to advance to the principal role and succeed requires an understanding of the learning processes at work when examining adult professionals. This study is designed to examine the professional growth of assistant principals by looking at them as adult learners.

Adult learning requires that activities must be authentic and embedded in functional activities.

This study used focus groups incorporating experienced secondary school principals and entry-year secondary school assistant principals to explore the research questions. The survey contains each research question followed by a description of the experiences identified by the study participants as “critical professional growth experiences” for entry year secondary school assistant principals as they prepare for advancement to the principal position. Please review each description and complete the rating for each item, identifying the level to which you personally agree or disagree with the findings.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT ATTACHED

Research study examining the professional growth of entry-year assistant principals

Please read survey directions shown in the body of the email you received.

* Required

RESEARCH QUESTION #1: When providing narrative descriptions of their entry-year, what specific job-embedded experiences do secondary school assistant principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for advancement to the school principal position?

1. • An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience being part of a school building administrative team faced with an unanticipated crisis. Examples included a student suicide, an accident involving a student that resulted in a student death, a school-based graffiti or social media post warning of a school shooting, and a major drug arrest at school that implicated a number of other students. Commonalities within each identified crisis included a description of the mentorship provided by the more experienced members of their leadership team and a sudden awareness of how many different individuals within the school community and between outside agencies are impacted and involved. Entry-year assistant principals felt that they would not have had the ability to acquire this learning through any synthetic principal preparation experience. These crisis events were described by entry-year assistant principals as their most critical professional development experiences during their entry-year. *

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2. • An entry-year secondary school assistant principal must experience a combustible, confrontational interaction with a significant stakeholder. Examples included an enraged parent showing up at school angry about the disciplining of their child, a teacher who is angry regarding an interaction with the assistant principal showing up at the office with a teacher's union representative, and a confrontation with an influential community member regarding athletic participation. These experiences are critical learning opportunities that provided significant professional growth. *

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RESEARCH QUESTION #2: Reflecting on their own personal entry-year experiences, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

3. • **The mastery of the student discipline process, including the student due process procedure, learning how to conduct an investigation into an incident, and handling the combative adults involved in the discipline incidents is a valuable learning experience that specifically assisted with the development of their awareness to the community connections and political aspects of the principal job. ***

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4. • **Involvement with school safety incidents is a critical learning experience. Examples included taking a gun away from a troubled student, the school response to a bomb threat, and the impact of social media on school threats and community response to an incident. ***

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5. • **Participation in some aspect of labor-management relations such as contract negotiations with the teacher's union is a critical learning experience. ***

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RESEARCH QUESTION #3: Reflecting on their professional experiences working with entry-year assistant principals, what specific job-embedded experiences do experienced secondary school principals identify as valuable and impactful to current entry-year assistant principals in preparation for their advancement to the principal position?

6. • **A school crisis event is a pivotal professional development experience for entry-year assistant principals. A crisis teaches beginning administrators about the multi-faceted nature of responding to incidents that can only be taught by going through it yourself. A critical part of the experience is working as a member of a team. The debriefing and reflection that needs to occur throughout the crisis is an important part of developing new skills. ***

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7. • Experienced principals identified the critical learning available to entry-year assistant principals when they are placed in charge of the planning and implementation of a large school event. Examples included a commencement or awards ceremony, a holiday observance, or the development of a master schedule. Public audience or school-community cooperation yield the greatest potential for professional development and assist beginning administrators develop an awareness of the socio-political aspects of school leadership. *

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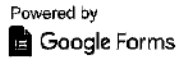
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8. • A labor management dispute, such as disciplining a teacher or staff member, especially if there is the involvement of a combative teacher union representative, and specific contract language governing employee discipline, is a critical learning experience for entry-year assistant principals. *

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DO NOT AGREE COMPLETELY AGREE



APPENDIX K

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Dear Investigators,

Your research project “From Rookie to All Star: Identifying Critical Workplace Experiences in a School Principal’s Professional Development” protocol (#177-19) has been reviewed. This study will use a phenomenological qualitative research design to learn about the learning experiences of entry year secondary school assistant principals’ identification of the most impactful experiences to their professional growth and preparation to the success of holding a principal position at a school.

After reviewing the original protocol and revisions submitted on April 22nd and April 26th, 2019 the research project has been approved and meets expedited category #7. You may begin the investigation immediately. The revisions made in the recruitment information, consent form, and methodology detailed the removal of language containing the term “anonymous” and stressing the possible breach of confidentiality in which the investigator has no control as to whether other participants of the group interview share identifiable information from the round table discussion with others outside of the study. The investigators have also made all efforts to inform participants to keep all discussions during the interviews private and not to share with others outside of the group. Revisions were made to make all participants aware of these risks so that they could use this knowledge to inform them what they should be comfortable sharing with the intention of reducing any negative repercussions should other participants share information expressed during the group interviews with other parties outside of the group.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to report immediately to the YSU IRB any deviations from the protocol and/or any adverse events that occur. As soon as you received your protocol number, please reference your protocol number in all correspondence about the research associated with this protocol.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Daniel J. Keown
Designated IRB Reviewer
Youngstown State University