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New principals: Experiences that influence the role

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New Principals: Experiences that Influence the Role

by

Marianne Simon

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School Counseling & Sport Management

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This dissertation titled New Principals: Experiences that Influence the Role

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DEDICATION

To Andrew and Hali, may you always reach for your dreams!

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Working on my doctorate is something that I had been thinking about for many years. It always seemed very daunting and out of my reach. I am very proud to have made it to this point and to be able to produce this piece of work, but I would not have been able to do it without the support of many people along the way.

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology-informed study is to examine the lived experiences of new principals and to understand the experiences that have influenced their role as principal. Phenomenological research is “interested in an analytical and descriptive experience of phenomena by individuals in their everyday world” (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). This framework is what drove the research study into the lived experiences of new principals and the experiences that have influenced their role. The study is qualitative in nature using three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five new principals in a Northeast Florida school district for a total of 15 interviews. The research questions that guided the research were: How do new principals (years 1-3) experience the principalship? And what personal and professional experiences have influenced the role of the principalship?

Findings reveal three major themes related to the research questions: professional and personal experiences, principal supports, and immense responsibility. The new principals participated in preparation programs at the university level and district level. All agreed that while beneficial, they would benefit with a more hands-on approach alongside a mentor administrator. The new principals’ experiences as classroom teachers and school coaches gave them many skills, used now in the principal role, and allowed them to be very comfortable with instructional leadership. Each of the new principals had a range of experiences as assistant principals with some having limited experience while others had extensive experiences. The new principals could name a variety of supports, but all felt that more intentional support is needed. The new principals all described having a feeling of immense responsibility as a new principal and lack strategies and support to cope with and manage those responsibilities.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The impact of having an effective principal on student achievement is nearly as large as the impact of an effective teacher (Krasnoff, 2015; Levin, 2021). High quality principals ensure students have strong educational opportunities, create strong and inclusive environments, empower staff to take on leadership roles, and make strong data-driven decisions (Levin). To have this positive impact, it is critical to have a high-quality principal in every school.

Understanding how to develop and support new principals into becoming highly effective principals is key. Nearly half of new principals leave their schools after three years, and nearly 20% leave every year (Superville, 2019; New Teacher Center, 2018). It is crucial to understand what experiences new principals go through and which experiences have influenced their role as principals, so that we can better support new principals and prevent new principal turnover. This transcendental phenomenology-informed study was designed to target this understanding. The following chapter provides a brief synopsis of the background of the problem, the problem statement, purpose statement and research questions, overview of the theoretical framework, overview of the methodology, significance of the study, organization of the study, and a chapter summary.

Background of the Problem

The importance of having an effective principal leading our schools cannot be overstated. Effective principals contribute to school culture and climate, quality of teachers, and student achievement (Baker et al., 2010; Krasnoff, 2015; Manna, 2015; Mitang, 2012; Protheroe, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). The role of principal is ever changing, with new roles added each year and very few taken away. While the role initially began with a head teacher in a one-

room schoolhouse, it has evolved into a complex, and multi-dimensional role. Principals are responsible for raising student achievement, providing strong instructional support to teachers, involving parents and community into the school program, and ensuring the safety of all students and staff members under their supervision (Davis and Darling-Hammond, 2012; Chiang et al., 2020; Protheroe, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Chapter 2 will detail these roles further in the literature review.

As the number of roles and responsibilities of principals grows, so does the stress level of new principals who find themselves underprepared for the role. Researchers have found that most pre-service university-and district-level training programs do not adequately prepare principals for the challenging role (Brazier & Bauer, 2013; Gill, 2012; Grigsby et al., 2010; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Mendels & Mitang, 2013; Mitang, 2012; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). It is important for districts and states to provide additional development and support once the new principals are in their roles. Unfortunately, states and districts do not prioritize principal support (Goldrick, 2017). As of 2015-2016, only 20 states required formal principal support systems (Goldrick). These support systems include professional development, coaching and mentoring, social networks, school teams, and state and district level support.

Without the supports listed above, new principals struggle with many challenges in their first three years. Due to the many roles of a school principal, the challenges can be different from principal to principal. Some of the main challenges for new principals are isolation (Bauer & Brazier, 2013; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010), pressure around high-stakes accountability and raising student achievement goals (Lee & Lee, 2020; Lyons & Algozzine, 2006), being a strong

instructional leader (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Costello, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007), and dealing with adult conflict (Gentilucci et al., 2013; Shoho & Barnett, 2010).

With the increased pressures associated with being a school principal, there is a high turnover rate. As stated previously, half of all new principals leave in their first three years (Superville, 2019; New Teacher Center, 2018). Grissom and Bartanen (2019) found negative impacts of principal turnover on teachers and students. Grissom and Bartanen also found a correlation to principal turnover and feelings of ineffectiveness. Principals who struggle through the first three years and do not know how to work through the challenges may have less job satisfaction and desire to leave to do something different (Bauer, 2013; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Tekleselassie et al., 2011). The experiences of principals, whether they happen prior to becoming a principal or during the principalship, may be the key to improving principal retention.

Professional experiences and personal experiences may influence the success of a school leader (Avolio, 1994; Byrne et al., 2018; Janson, 2008; Nash & Bangert, 2013; Shannon et al., 2020; Thomas, 2008). Professional experiences could include taking on teacher leadership roles, coaching roles, working with adults in various settings, participating in university or district preparation programs, or experiences related to working as an assistant principal. There are many professional experiences required in the induction of a new principal, while others are experiences that a potential principal takes on themselves to further develop as a leader. Personal experiences are those that people experience in their everyday lives. These could include hardships, family dynamics, relationships, and social situations. In a study by Hess and Kelly (2007), all but four percent of practicing principals report that on-the-job experiences and

relationships with colleagues have been more helpful in preparing them for their current role than their graduate school studies. Digging into these experiences may inform those responsible for preparing principals for success in the future.

Problem Statement

The principals in this study are from a Northeast Florida district. Most principals went through the same district-level assistant principal preparation program, all served as assistant principals in the same county, and most participated in the same district-level principal preparation program. The problem is that many principals in the district go through the same preparation programs but have a wide variety of success as a principal in this district. The district also has a high turnover rate of principals, with 31% of principals leaving in their first three years of the principalship. We need to do research to figure out what makes some new principals successful and others not. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the types of personal and professional experiences that influence the effectiveness of a new principal. Furthermore, there is also a lack of research on hearing the voices of new principals as they go through their first few years of the principalship, what their challenges are, and what experiences have influenced their success.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology-informed study is to examine the lived experiences of new principals and to understand the experiences that have influenced their role as principal.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do new principals (years 1-3) experience the principalship?
2. What personal and professional experiences have influenced the role of the principalship?

Overview of Theoretical Framework

This study focused on the lived experiences of new principals and those experiences that have influenced the role of principal. Phenomenological research is “interested in an analytical and descriptive experience of phenomena by individuals in their everyday world” (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The general purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand and describe a phenomenon in-depth, and to find the essence of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon. Phenomenology comprises a theoretical framework and method designed specifically to study the lived experiences from the perspective of those who experience the phenomenon. This framework drove the research study into the lived experiences of new principals in a Northeast Florida district.

Phenomenology as a theoretical framework and methodology comes from the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Larsen & Adu, 2022; Moustakas, 1994). It seeks reality in the individuals’ stories about a phenomenon to produce an in-depth description of the phenomenon. This study uses the theory of transcendental phenomenology, which focuses on the discovery of meanings and essences in knowledge. Husserl believed there is a significant difference between facts and essences, between the real and unreal (Moustakas, 1994). Essence refers to the qualities of an experience that make it universal, it is what makes an experience what it is (Moustakas).

Overview of Methodology

To address the research questions, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to investigate the lived experiences of new principals and the experiences that have influenced their role. Qualitative was chosen because it is an approach used to explore and understand the meaning individuals give to their everyday experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A phenomenological approach was chosen because it is a method that helps collect meaning around the phenomenon of being a new principal, from participants who have experienced the phenomenon. In phenomenological research, the researcher's job is to be unbiased as they enter the interview process, and to be open to the meanings gleaned from the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

To understand the lived experiences of new principals and the experiences that have influenced their role, I recruited and selected five new elementary school principals who have been in their role for one to three years using a participant survey. Criteria for selection included years of experience, working in a school rated A, B, or C according to the Florida State Assessment in the same Northeast Florida school district, and worked as an assistant principal in the same county they are now principal. The informed consent of the participants was collected. The consent included information about the study, a statement about the voluntary aspect of the study, the benefits and risks of the research, and a list of requirements to be eligible for the study. The informed consent also addressed confidentiality. Participants knew that every effort was made to keep their identity unknown.

Interviews were the main mode of data collection for this study. Seidman's (2019) process for interviewing was used to conduct three interviews per participant. This is a three-

interview process that starts with questions about the participants' experiences before becoming a principal during interview number one. Interview number two asked questions related to the experiences of the principal while they are in the role of principal, and interview number three required the participant to reflect on the meaning of things discussed in interviews one and two. Interview three also asks participants to talk about things they would change or like to see changed in the future based on their reflection. All interviews were recorded and transcribed within a week of the actual interview.

Data analysis occurred using the phenomenological method. This method involves engaging in the epoche process of setting aside my personal beliefs as I analyze the participant data. I then engaged in horizontalization as I worked to pull out different meanings from the data. Reduction and elimination were used to remove meanings repeated or not relevant to the study. The phenomenon was described by first writing a textural description using the actual words of the participants, then writing a structural description to describe how things happened, and finally formatting a synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions to get at the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Significance of the Research

There are several significant reasons for understanding the lived experiences of new principals, whether those are experiences that happened prior to the principalship or those that occur during their first few years. For example, stories of new principals and their past experiences help understand what past experiences may be beneficial in the development of a school leader. This research may influence future principals in their experiences as they work to become a school principal. Additionally, this study may influence university principal

preparation programs, as they work to align their programs with the experiences needed to become school principals. Universities can work to add specific experiences to their principal preparation programs, which influence the role of school principal. Finally, this study may influence school districts who invest substantial time and money in the selection, retention, and professional development of new principals. School districts can use this information in multiple ways. Districts can use it to inform their principal preparation programs, assistant principal development programs, as a tool for principal selection, and as information to help drive professional development and supports offered to new school leaders.

Understanding the current experiences of new principals is also important. Stories of new principals and their daily experiences help them understand the role of principal, the challenges new principals face, and the experiences that help new principals work through the challenges. This research may influence current new principals, as they work to understand their role as principals and deal with the challenges of being a new principal. Understanding how others make meaning from their lived experiences of being a new principal could influence their feelings of being a new principal and potentially help keep them in the role. Districts can use the information from the study to work on a plan for principal retention. By understanding the daily challenges of a new principal, districts can create stronger support systems and more direct professional development opportunities for their new principals.

The significance of this study was to understand the lived experiences of new principals and the experiences that have influenced their role as principals. Understanding what experiences are important to the development of a school leader was developed by analyzing the data to get an essence of what it means to be a new principal. In the future, this research may provide

valuable information to future school leaders, university preparation programs, and school districts.

Organization of the Study

This research sought to understand the lived experiences of new elementary school principals and to understand the nature of experiences that prepare new principals for the role. Chapter two provides a review of the literature into themes related to the research questions and related to the unique roles and challenges of a new principal. The literature review provides context around the powerful impact of an effective principal, an understanding of the historical and contemporary roles of an elementary principal, the types of principal development and supports provided to new principals, the various challenges that new principals face, the cause and impact of principal turnover, and previous personal and professional experiences that new principals have had to help them develop. Chapter three provides an in-depth explanation of the research design and methodology used to study the lived experiences of new principals, and the experiences that have influenced their role. The rationale for choosing a phenomenological, qualitative study is provided. This chapter also reviews the selection of participants, informed consent, confidentiality, data collection, data analysis, and a breakdown of the specific methods used in phenomenology. Chapter four provides an analysis of the findings through textural and structural descriptions of two participants, a composite textural and structural description of all participants, and concludes with the essence of the experiences of new principals and the personal and professional experiences that influenced the role of principal. Chapter 5 reviews the results of the study and provides connections of the results to prior findings concerning new principals and their experiences. A discussion on the limitations of the study will follow the

presentation of the findings. The chapter concludes with a review of the implications of the findings for both research and practice.

Chapter Summary

The first few years of a principal's tenure are the most important. It is during this time that principals will build confidence and skills necessary for success or choose to leave the position. With so many new principals leaving the role of principal, it is critical that research identify experiences that can positively influence the role of principal. Understanding the lived experiences of new principals and the experiences that influence the role of principals can influence the retention and effectiveness of new principals.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

According to Krasnoff (2015), “principals are second only to teachers as the most influential school-level factor in student achievement” (p.1). Ineffective principals can have negative impacts on schools. Schools with ineffective principals tend to have poor school cultures, low teacher morale, and low student achievement (Khanal & Park, 2016). For this reason, it is critical to ensure that highly effective principals are leading our schools. To become a highly effective principal, new principals must rely on comprehensive preparation programs, consistent professional development and training, support, mentorship, and reflect on their experiences (Augustine-Shaw & Hachiya, 2017; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Krasnoff, 2015; Orr, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). The purpose of this literature review is to provide context to understand the nature of experiences that prepare highly effective principals. It has been divided into the following themes: (1) impact of effective principals, (2) historical and contemporary roles and responsibilities of principals, (3) principal development and support, (4) principal challenges, (5) principal turnover, (6) professional experiences, and (7) personal experiences.

Impact of Effective Principals

Principal leadership plays a significant role in the success of a school (Baker et al., 2010; Manna, 2015; Protheroe, 2011; Sebastian and Allensworth, 2012). Hallinger and Heck (1998) conducted a meta-analysis on the impact of the school principal on school effectiveness and student achievement. Hallinger and Heck found that principals have a large, yet indirect effect on school effectiveness and student achievement. They found the impact relatively small, yet

statistically significant. Some of the indirect influences of principal leadership include: (1) school culture (Baker et al., 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Krasnoff, 2015; Manna, 2015; Mitang, 2012; Protheroe, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012), (2) quality of teachers (Branch et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2011; Grissom et al., 2013; Manna, 2015; Mitang, 2012), and (3) student achievement (Branch et al., 2012; Dhuey & Smith, 2015; Mendels & Mitang, 2013; Miller, 2013; New Leaders, 2013; Protheroe, 2011).

An effective principal impacts school culture by providing structure and a learning environment conducive to student learning. One of the Florida Principal Leadership Standards is that effective educational leaders cultivate a caring, rigorous and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of all students (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], 2022a). This standard emphasizes the connection between school culture and student learning. A strong learning climate and culture is an important way to influence the overall instruction in a school (Manna, 2015; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Principals who put strong systems in place and provide an orderly working environment for teachers find more success. These principals can influence student achievement by creating working conditions for teachers that make teachers feel valued and supported (Manna, 2015; Protheroe, 2011). Schools with stronger systems tend to be safer and more orderly, allowing for a stronger focus on instruction and better student outcomes (Baker et al., 2010; Branch et al., 2012; Protheroe, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Another impact of effective principals is on the quality of teachers. One of the most important principal behaviors is the recruitment and selection of high-quality teachers (Fuller et al., 2011). The principal creates an environment where teachers want to continue to learn and

grow once recruited into a school building (Grissom et al., 2013; Mann, 2015; Mitang, 2012). Mitang claims that “the principal is the single biggest determinant of whether or not teachers want to stay in their schools” (p. 25). Teachers want to stay with principals who collaborate directly with teachers, provide resources and professional development for teachers, and create an environment where teachers feel valued (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Mitang, 2012). This environment consists of setting high expectations, creating support systems for teachers, and working one-on-one with teachers who need support (Grissom et al., 2013; Manna, 2015). Principals who are strong, effective, responsive leaders help enhance the abilities of teachers to do excellent work (Mann, 2015). Manna claims that by providing an encouraging, nurturing environment for teachers, principals become multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices in their schools.

Finally, an effective principal has an impact on student achievement. In an age of high-stakes accountability, a principal's ability to positively impact student achievement is important to the success of a principal. Highly effective principals increase the achievement of a student by two to seven months of learning growth in a single school year, while ineffective principals lower achievement by the same measure (Branch et al., 2012; Dhuey and Smith, 2015). High principal turnover has a negative impact on student achievement (Beteille et al., 2011; Grissom et al., 2019; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Miller, 2013; New Teacher Center, 2013). Schools who lose a first-year principal have a decline in student test scores, and student test scores are lower at schools with new principals, and even lower if the school has had two or more transitions in leadership over a 12-year period. (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). The best

way to impact student achievement across schools is to increase the quality and selection of principals (Mendels and Mitang, 2013, New Leaders, 2013).

To summarize, principals influence schools by creating a culture that allows teachers and students to thrive. There is little chance of creating this culture without a skilled and effective instructional leader to help shape the work (Krasnoff, 2015; Manna, 2015; New Leaders, 2013). It is critical for school districts to ensure that there is a skilled and effective instructional leader at each of its schools. Districts that take a strong approach to selecting and training principals and ensure continuous support should have a positive impact in their schools (Mendels and Mitang, 2013). If districts take a strong approach to selecting and training principals, their principals will continue to have a strong impact on school culture, quality of teachers, and student achievement.

Historical and Contemporary Roles and Responsibilities of the Principal

Evolution of the Role

The role of the principal has evolved over the years, becoming a complex and multi-dimensional role (Augustine-Shaw et al., 2017; Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Manna, 2015).

Early schools consisted of single room schoolhouses with a single teacher teaching a class of students. In the early 1800s, schools began to become larger with the formation of grade level classes. At that time, the position of the "principal teacher" was established (Kafka, 2009). A head teacher or teaching principal was the overarching authority over the building (Rousmaniere, 2007). Soon, the school principal replaced the nineteenth century head teacher. It was at this point that an informal position was exchanged for a more formal position, and the role

changed from administration of tasks to supervising teachers (Rousmaniere). The work of the nineteenth century principal was still not centered around teaching and learning. It was mostly based on expediency. An important note is that the school principal had no job description, guidelines, or support (Rousmaniere, 2007). The early principal is compared to a foreman at a factory or the middle-manager at a company (Hallinger, 1992; Matthews & Crow, 2003; Rousmaniere, 2007, Rousmaniere, 2009). The principal was responsible for the day-to-day running of the school, and not necessarily the strategic policy decisions (Rousmaniere, 2007). The principal was between the school and the local government and was responsible for ensuring that the educational policies set by the local government were followed in the classrooms (Rousmaniere, 2009).

By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, principals began to fight for some autonomy in their buildings (Kafka, 2009). Principals began to try to professionalize the position. One of the first things principals did was try to distinguish between mundane tasks and supervisory tasks to set some job descriptions (Rousmaniere, 2007). This focus on supervision allowed principals to have increased authority to hire and fire, assign extra duties, and recommend teachers and staff for promotions (Rousmaniere). The second thing that professionalized the position is the formulation of the National Association for Secondary School Principals formed in 1916 and the National Association for Elementary School Principals formed in 1921 (Kafka, 2009, Mathews & Crow, 2003). These organizations helped give a voice to the school principals.

By the mid-1930s, many principals no longer held teaching responsibilities. Some states began to distinguish between teacher certificates and principal certificates (Rousmaniere, 2007).

The introduction of compulsory education in the 1940s caused a large influx of students attending school. With more students, education became a more important part, and teachers and principals became even more important members in their community (Kafka, 2009). By the 1950s, one-third of all states stipulated specific academic requirements for both teachers and principals (Rousmaniere, 2007). In the 1960s and 1970s, new federally funded programs were brought to schools, and principals were faced with the responsibility of managing these programs. The federally funded programs focused on special student populations (Hallinger, 1992). The federally funded programs also required innovative curriculum development, and so it was at this time that there was a shift in the role of principal from one who meets the status quo to one who works towards school improvement and change (Hallinger). Wolcott (1973) describes the principal as the single person responsible for connecting a large bureaucratic system and the individual daily experiences of many children and teachers. The role of principal in the 1980s focused on instructional leader. According to Hallinger (1992), principals were expected to be knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction. And by the 1990s, principals were changing from the instructional leader to the transformational leader. Leithwood et al. (1992), referring to the instructional leader as “leading from the front of or the middle of the band” and the “transformational leader” as “leading from the back of the band” (p. 6).

Many roles are still applicable to school principals as we move into the twenty-first century, but more have been added, and the role has become more stressful. The principalship of today is much more demanding than it used to be (Ferrandino, 2001; Protheroe, 2008). Protheroe found that the typical elementary school principal today puts in longer hours (an average of nine hours a day and 54 hours a week), leads a larger school (an average of 425 students), and

supervises more people (an average of 30 teachers and 14 staff members) than the typical principal in the past decades. If history is any indicator, the role of principal will continue to change as we try to meet the social, economic, and political changes affecting schools (Clifford and Coggshall, 2021a; Ferrandino, 2001; Protheroe, 2008). The following section will discuss the current roles of the school principal and the challenges that come with each of those roles.

Current Roles and Responsibilities

There are many roles of the principalship. The roles can fit into the following general categories, and then will be expanded in more detail below: (a) developing people, (b) redesigning the organization, (c) managing instruction, and (d) involving parents and the community (Davis and Darling-Hammond, 2012; Chiang et al., 2020; Protheroe, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

The first key role for school principals is to develop people, specifically teachers. Branch et al. (2012) claims:

a primary channel through which principals can be expected to improve the quality of education is by raising the quality of teachers, either by improving the instruction provided by existing teachers or through teacher transitions that improved the caliber of the school's workforce. (p. 5)

Teaching and learning must be at the forefront of everything that principals do (Grigsby et al., 2010). Principals should have a vision for how to improve the instructional capacity of their teachers. Classroom observations and walk-throughs are great tools for observing instruction, collecting information on professional development needs, and giving feedback to teachers to improve instruction (Whitehurst et al., 2014). However, principals must do more than just

observe teachers. Feedback and coaching teachers should go hand in hand with the observations (Grissom et al., 2013; Chiang et al., 2020). Principals should also be able to provide effective professional development to teachers or have a member on their staff who can provide the quality professional development. Quality professional development for teachers should be purposeful and meaningful, should properly train teachers to increase teaching success, and have principals attend with teachers to be most effective (Grigsby et al., 2010; Grissom et al., 2013)

The next role of the school principal, redesigning the organization, includes tasks such as building school culture and creating a safe and nurturing environment. As mentioned earlier, a highly effective principal influences the culture of the school by creating a high-quality learning environment in which teachers and students are motivated to learn and grow (Baker et al., 2010; Krasnoff, 2015; Manna, 2015; Protheroe, 2011; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Building a positive school culture includes high expectations for students and staff, providing resources and support, developing relationships, celebrating successes, and setting goals (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Manna, 2015; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Creating a safe environment is also part of redesigning the organization and a key role of the principal.

After the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Act passed in Florida in 2018, many safety protocols were added to Florida schools. These protocols were an addition to the role of principal. School principals have always been responsible for school safety, but this law is specific to what they must do and the consequences for not following it. With this new law, school principals now must have a law enforcement officer on site each day, hold Behavior Threat Assessment Team (BTAT) meetings each month with the law enforcement officer and the school leadership team, hold a code red active shooter drill each month, and provide professional

development to students and staff on how to respond in the case of an active shooter (FLDOE, 2022b). These tasks are in addition to the other safety procedures that principals were already responsible for, such as fire drills, student code of conduct, student discipline, visitor protocols, and school emergencies. In 2019, Coronavirus disease impacted schools (COVID-19), an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (World Health Organization, 2022). This added even more responsibility to the school principal around safety.

COVID-19 began to impact United States schools in March of 2020. District level leaders scrambled to develop plans to deal with COVID-19. Many of those plans included closing schools and preparing an online platform for students to continue to receive their education, while the virus continued to spread through the U.S. population. COVID-19 brought on increased responsibilities to the principal role. In a study by Clifford and Coggschall (2021b), principals reported feeling like a first responder in many ways. Principals provided frontline services related to COVID-19 responses, such as contact tracking, enforcement of mask policies, and proper sanitation of the school. Principals had to learn to take on additional roles due to illnesses of staff members. In a blog by Stavely (2022), principals reported acting as crossing guard, para-professional, teacher, lunch monitor, and cafeteria worker. Principals had to increase their communication with families, as principals sent daily messages on changes to protocols and updates on positive cases. Principals had to contact parents when students were not coming to school, whether online or in-person (Clifford & Coggschall, 2021b). Principals spent less time on curriculum, instruction, assessment, school improvement, and building professional capacity during this time (Clifford & Coggschall, 2021a). Providing a community of care for students,

building the capacity of staff, engaging families and community members, and operations and management were at the forefront (Clifford & Coggshall, 2021b).

The third key role of a principal is managing instruction or being an instructional leader. The principal being an effective instructional leader is critical to the success of all aspects of the school (Krasnoff, 2015). Principal as instructional leader is at the forefront of principal evaluation systems, promotion and demotion decisions, student achievement results, and success of teachers in the classroom (Krasnoff, 2015; Manna, 2015; Mitang, 2012; Rigby, 2016). Krasnoff (2015) claims school principals need training, skills, and experience in instructional leadership and developing teacher's individual effectiveness. One concern is that there is not a universally accepted definition of what it means to be an instructional leader (Rigby, 2016). Without a common definition, it is difficult to develop a program to teach instructional leadership that would be effective in any school environment. The following are some important tasks related to instructional leadership that principals should do: (a) analyze data, (b) conduct walkthroughs and provide feedback, (c) provide resources and professional development, (d) work directly with teachers, and (e) promote parental and community involvement in the instructional process (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grigsby et al., 2010). Being a highly effective instructional leader will enable the principal to be successful in a high-stakes accountability system. Current expectations for principals are to demonstrate bottom line results by increasing student achievement in their buildings (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Grigsby et al. 2010; Hess & Kelly, 2007).

A final vital role of a school principal is to involve parents and the community in the instructional program of the school. It is up to the principal to design parent involvement events,

invite parents to be part of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and work to build a School Advisory Committee (SAC) with parents and community members. Parent involvement is important to the success of students in school, as it directly relates to school culture and increasing student achievement (Alhosani et al., 2016; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Rapp & Duncan, 2011). Involving parents and community requires excellent communication skills and the ability to build relationships. Principals need to actively listen, problem solve, and establish boundaries when it comes to collaborating with parents (Gentilucci, 2013; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). The additional roles caused by COVID-19 have influenced the involvement of parents. Physical involvement with schools has not been possible or extremely limited due to safety concerns (Goodall, 2013; Jeynes, 2018). During this time, principals had to work to engage parents in new ways to keep the connection between home and school.

This section has sought to illustrate the multi-faceted role of the principal by looking at the historical and contemporary roles of the job. It is not an exhaustive list of the roles of principals, but one that covers some of the more important roles according to research. With the list of roles and responsibilities being so long for principals, it is important to have proper professional development and support for principals.

Principal Development and Support

It is vital to have support in place to help new principals in their first few years (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Mendels & Mitang, 2013; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). This section will provide a review of literature on the types of supports that benefit new principals. The supports discussed are (a) professional development, (b) coaching and mentoring, (c) building of social networks, (d) building of school support teams, and (e) state and district support.

Professional development for new principals has been spotty at best (Chiang et al., 2020). Professional development for new principals should focus on legal issues, working with difficult staff members and parents, using data to inform decisions, school budget and finance, creating a collegial faculty, and instructional leadership (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Duncan et al., 2011). Professional development needs to be differentiated based on the diverse needs of the individual principal, no matter the topic (Alvoid & Black, 2014). Districts who are doing professional development for principals well are ensuring that the training is ongoing and intensive, and providing job-embedded training where needed (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016; Honig, 2012).

Coaching and mentoring are also important supports for new principals. Coaching and mentoring can increase the knowledge of new principals, while also improving the work of experienced principals (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Hansford & Ehrich, 2005; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016). Mentoring promotes relationship building and reduces isolation in new principals (Bauer & Silver, 2017; Parylo et al., 2012). Building relationships with mentors allows new principals to gain more perspective and confidence in carrying out their roles and responsibilities (Augustine-Shaw & Hachiya, 2017). New principals report mentoring as the most useful and beneficial support received (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Parylo et al., 2012). There are many ways new principals benefit from mentoring and coaching. They provide new principals with an avenue to talk about the challenges in their buildings and give them someone to bounce ideas off to resolve some of those challenges. This honest dialogue between mentors and mentees “informs daily practice and collaborative conversation, begins to address organizational goals, inform decision-making, and creates an impactful focus on quality teaching and learning” (Augustine-Shaw & Hachiya, 2017,

p. 19). There are few studies on the use of coaching as a support for principals. However, Huff et al. (2013) did a study on the use of a specific coaching curriculum with new principals and found that new principals were more successful when given the opportunity to participate in critical reflections and then debrief with their coach on those reflections. It challenged new principals' perceptions of conditions in their schools and helped new principals brainstorm next steps for improvement.

New principals can develop social networks for support, in addition to the social connections formed through a mentorship program. One key strategy for supporting new principals is to engage the principals in authentic peer networks, where the new principals feel open to learning from more experienced principals (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer et al., 2019; New Teacher Center, 2018; Tingle, 2019). Districts can help support this work by providing principals the time to participate in these social networks. These social networks can help mitigate the challenges of role overload and isolation in new principals (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer et al., 2019; Hess & Kelly, 2007; New Teacher Center, 2018; Tingle, 2019). Developing strategies for lessening the feeling of isolation will help increase job satisfaction and persistence in new principals (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer et al., 2019).

Building a school team that can help carry some burden is an advantageous endeavor for new principals. Shared instructional leadership can help reduce the pressure felt by a new principal (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Costello, 2015; Gentilucci et al., 2013). The instructional leadership team should include assistant principals, guidance counselors, and key teachers who work together towards shared goals (Davies & Brundrett, 2010). New principals require professional development and support of their mentors to learn how to build trust within a school

team, to share responsibility within the school. Building teacher leaders is typically a daunting task if the principal does not have the skills to do so (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Costello, 2015; Gentilucci et al., 2013).

A final level of support for new principals comes from state and district support. The state helps by developing state leadership standards that all principals should develop to become effective leaders. Mendels and Mitang (2013) claim these standards only come to life when a district uses them to select, hire, train, and evaluate their school leaders. States also add additional support to new principals by making principal development a priority. States can offer in-depth professional development opportunities that are consistent with the state's initiatives. Districts play a much larger role in the development of new principals. Districts have a responsibility to promote principals' growth and success by providing appropriate supports (Mendels & Mitang, 2013; Tingle, 2019). Bohn (2013) outlines some of these supports to include: (a) consider the principalship through the lens of fresh experience (b) provide anticipatory professional development to principals (c) help principals with a grade or school mismatch and (d) develop networks of support for principals. Finally, districts can support principals through the principal supervisors. The position of principal supervisor should be principal support and teaching by working with individual principals and groups of principals with similar needs to build their instructional leadership skills (Honig, 2012). When used in such a way, new principals will begin to see principal supervisors as more of a support than an evaluator (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Tingle, 2019). Adding this level of support gives new principals another way to reduce their feelings of isolation and burden caused by the challenges of their role.

Principal Challenges

With the ever-changing role of the principalship, new principals coming into the profession find the role challenging. New principals are surprised and overwhelmed in the first few years by the role demands and work overload (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Manna 2015; Oplatka, 2012; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). New principals receive training at colleges and universities, participate in district preparation programs, and have leadership experience through their assistant principal roles. However, principals still find themselves lacking skills needed to meet the demanding challenges presented in their roles (Gentilucci et al., 2013). Some of these skills are “soft skills”, such as stress management, personal organization, and communication. Manna (2015) posits that while the role continues to change, it is unlikely that tasks will be eliminated from the role; rather, the role will be expanded to complement traditional tasks. Manna also suggests that new principals need to be ready to engage in an “expanding set of responsibilities, technology change, and growing student needs that are characteristic of a diversifying nation struggling to provide equal opportunities to all its students” (p. 12). The changing role can lead to poor job satisfaction in the early years (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; New Leaders, 2013; Shoho & Barnett, 2010).

One area of struggle for new principals is isolation, as new principals deal with this complex role. Bauer and Brazer (2013) state that isolation has to do with a feeling of being alone at work. New principals feel a lot of pressure to do all the work themselves in the beginning years, because new principals are still building their leadership teams in their new setting. New principals understand that the ultimate person responsible for the success of the school is on them, and that can be lonely (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). If we want

new principals to be successful in their role, we need to support role overload and social supports (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer & Silver, 2018; Stephenson & Bauer, 2010). Social supports play an influential role in supporting the social and emotional stressors of being a school principal, as discussed previously. These social supports would be informal social networks consisting of other principals who can share in some of the same experiences of the new principals.

In an age of high-stakes accountability, new principals are under great pressure to increase student performance. There is an expectation that new principals increase student achievement or at least maintain the current achievement levels (Burkhauser et al., 2013). This is true even though studies have shown that student achievement tends to go down during a principal transition (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). Accountability can have positive effects on schools. In a study by Lyons & Algozzine (2006), principals listed the following positive impacts of school accountability on their role (a) increased focus on monitoring student achievement (b) aligning curriculum to the assessment (c) increased awareness of need for tutoring services (d) increased focus on assigning teachers appropriately and (e) instructional time was more protected. Accountability also has negative impacts. Some of the negative impacts of school accountability include unfair testing requirements for special needs students or students with English as a second language, heavy sanctions applied based on lack of student achievement, and challenges with prioritizing educational goals (Lee & Lee, 2020; Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). It is important for new principals to understand the positive and negative impacts of high-stakes accountability so that it does not becoming an overwhelming challenge for them.

As described in the role of an effective principal, instructional leadership is a necessary skill for a new principal to have. Those coming into their first years as principal are finding they are not prepared to completely take on the role of instructional leader (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Costello, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Costello (2015) claims some of the challenges new principals are having with instructional leadership are vague ideas of the role of principal, feelings of inadequacy related to their knowledge, and time management. There is also not a universal definition for instructional leadership. Due to this lack of universal definition, principals must figure out for themselves what instructional leadership should look like in their school (Costello, 2015; Fink & Markholt, 2013).

Working with adults poses another challenge for many new principals. Creating and sustaining positive and productive working relationships with adults can be challenging (Gentilucci et al., 2013; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). Building trust with teachers and staff takes time and sometimes principals do not have the time to build those relationships before needing to act. When a principal is leading the instructional work at the school and coaching teachers in the classroom, “teachers may feel less likely to openly reflect on their own performance deficiencies with a coach who also functions as an evaluator” (Alvoid & Black, 2014). It is important that this trust is built before a principal plays these dual roles. Some principals are uncomfortable with dealing with adults who put their own agendas ahead of the students and knowing how to help those individuals understand that it was occurring (Shoho & Barnett, 2010).

The new role involving safety in schools, as discussed previously, has been a challenge for school principals. Alvoid and Black (2014) claim that while this change in safety was much needed, it added another layer of responsibility and challenge to the role of principal and

something else that may pull principal's attention away from instruction. There are mixed feelings from the community on some of the new procedures, especially with the benefits of having a law enforcement officer on site daily and with the need for monthly code red drills. School principals find themselves in the middle of the debate as principals try to follow the law and create a safe learning environment for students. In a study by Morales (2020), 94.42% of participants supported the law enforcement officers on campus to provide mentorship to students, while 9.09% of participants did not support law enforcement presence on school campuses because participants saw it was a way to strengthen the school to prison pipeline, intimidate students, and scare students of color. With code red drills, principals must ensure students are prepared for an active shooter, while not causing alarm or anxiety in students. Blad (2018) found that in some districts, parents have petitioned in opposition of active shooter drills because parents do not want their children exposed to discussions on violence at such an early age. Principals are asked to follow the law and be able to address parent concerns during these changes to school safety procedures.

With the new roles brought on by COVID-19, principals experienced heightened levels of stress on the job (Brackett et al., 2020; Clifford & Coggshall, 2021a; Clifford & Coggshall, 2021b; Stavely, 2022; Woo & Steiner, 2022). In a RAND study in 2022, four out of every five principals reported frequent job-related stress and one-fourth were thinking of leaving the job. Some of the challenges causing the stress are (a) supporting the well-being of teachers and students (b) managing pandemic related conditions such as changes to the instructional model and implementing COVID protocols (c) managing staffing, attendance, and schedules (d) addressing social injustice and the political differences, and (e) finding a work-life balance in the

remote setting (Brackett et al., 2020; Clifford & Coggschall, 2021a; Stavely, 2022; Woo & Steiner, 2022). As schools began to come back to face-to-face learning, schools have an additional challenge of trying to eliminate student learning loss created by the pandemic. Accountability systems for student achievement are back in place, but principals are feeling frustration because they have not been given time to address the learning gap (Clifford & Coggschall, 2021b). Principals are finding themselves moving from one urgent task to another with a feeling of burnout and exhaustion. In the study by Clifford and Coggschall (2021a), when asked what additional learning would be beneficial in dealing with a pandemic, principals report that more learning in crisis management is needed and that effective communication in highly politicized communities is needed.

New principals also report time management as a challenge (Gentilucci et al., 2013; New Teacher Center, 2018). Many new principals struggle with balancing the work overload and the personal aspects of their life. Many feel bad about not being able to balance the job and home as a new principal. Shoho and Barnett (2010) found new principals have expressed feeling guilty about missing important family events or milestones in their children's lives. With the role of principal continuing to change and more responsibilities added, time is a "scarce resource" (Grissom et al., 2015). With time being such an issue, it is important for principals to use their time wisely and prioritize their tasks (Khan et al., 2015). Most principals consider instruction as their most important task and principals with the ability and skills to prioritize find they spend most of their time on instruction (Grissom et al., 2015). Principals who have not developed time management skills or lack training of time management skills find it challenging to dedicate time to instruction (Grissom et al., 2015; Khan et al., 2015).

Most principals spend much of their time on student services, managing budgets, and dealing with student discipline issues (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Horng et al., 2010). In the Horng et al. study, principals reported spending 30% of their time taking care of administrative duties, 20% on organization management activities, and 10% on instruction. This contradicts research that says the most time should be spent on leadership activities (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Protheroe, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Although principals are aware that the focus should be on instructional leadership, they are often overloaded with other tasks and unable to prioritize the instructional program at their school (Grissom et al, 2015; Khan et al., 2015). With the many challenges of the principalship, there is a concern around principal turnover and the impacts of that turnover.

Principal Turnover

Principals play an especially important role at their school and when a school has a change in their school principal, there are sometimes negative consequences. New Teacher Center (2018) reported that twenty-five thousand (one quarter) of the country's principals leave their schools each year, adversely affecting student achievement across the country. Consequences for principal turnover are negative on average (Beteille et al., 2011; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). The negative consequences of principal turnover impact both students and teachers (Beteille et al., 2011; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). The impact is on student achievement and on teacher retention. One way to circumvent the impact of principal turnover is to fill the vacancies with experienced principals or provide necessary supports to assist new principals. Miller (2013) found most schools have principals with fewer than 10 years of tenure. The turnover rate of new principals is even greater

than experienced principals. New Teacher Center (2018) also found that fifty percent of new principals quit during their third year in the role.

Demotions, promotions, and relocations/other job opportunities are some of the reasons principals are leaving the principalship. Grissom and Bartanen (2019) found that within district transfers, promotions to central office, and demotions were all equally likely to happen and demotions to other positions make up nearly one-fifth of principal turnover (p. 37). Demotions are heavily related to student achievement scores and principal performance (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Corcoran, 2017; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Principals currently work in a high-stakes accountability environment and their evaluations are based on the student achievement of the school in most states. Principals who have high evaluations by their supervisors and who work in schools with high student achievement are less likely to leave their schools and principals in low achieving schools or in schools where achievement declined, are more likely to leave their schools (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Grissom and Bartanen, 2019). Good principals are leaving the profession and we are disincentivizing quality candidates from applying for the position when student test scores are the sole measure of principal effectiveness (Corcoran, 2017; Hollingworth, 2013). There are also emotional aspects of the principal job that are a factor in principal turnover. In a study by Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011), three factors of job satisfaction influenced principals' decision to stay or leave the position. These factors are 1) belief their job is worthy 2) their assessment of satisfaction with the district and 3) level of enthusiasm for the principalship. Even if school principals rate themselves high in each of these factors, it may not be enough to keep principals in the job. Many principals report feeling a sense

of fulfillment in the role that comes with the positive aspects, but many times it is not enough to outweigh the negative issues (Bauer & Silver, 2018).

Strategies for retaining high quality principals can improve principal turnover. One of these strategies is ensuring that the selection and placement process in school districts focus on finding a good fit between principal and school. Sometimes, in their haste to become a principal, there is a mismatch between principal and the needs of the school. The principal must be honest when discussing the type of school they feel ready to lead (Baker et al., 2010). Districts also need to work to make sure that they use a selection process that gets them the best individual needed to fit a particular school. By improving the placement process of principals and supporting principals in the role, positive impacts on student achievement, job satisfaction, and stability in school systems could occur (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Palmer & Mullooly, 2015). Another strategy for mitigating principal turnover is to provide a salary that will entice new leaders to take on and stay in their positions. Principals with higher relative salaries are more likely to be highly stable (Baker et al., 2010; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Supporting principals in their first few years of the principalship and beyond is also a strategy for retaining effective principals. One of these supports should be in helping new principals build strong leadership teams at their school sites (Whitehurst et al., 2014). Leadership distribution and knowing how to distribute leadership has the potential to ease some of the stressors on the principal (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Mascal & Leithwood, 2010). It helps diminish the feelings of isolation felt by new principals and help principals feel a part of a team.

One last point to make regarding principal turnover from Mendels and Mitang (2013) is that “not all turnover is bad. Districts should be able to remove subpar principals who can’t or

won't improve even with support" (p. 28). The important part of this statement is the support. Districts first must provide principals with the necessary supports to be successful before districts consider demotion.

Professional Experiences

In looking at the readiness of principals to take on the challenges of the position and trying to prevent principal turnover, it is important to consider the experiences that individuals have prior to becoming a principal. This section will address the following professional experiences that could have occurred for many of our school principals. It will cover: (a) principal preparation programs, (b) informal mentoring, and (c) assistant principal experiences.

Principal Preparation Programs

Principal preparation programs are designed to provide candidates with the things needed to become a school-based administrator. Mitang (2012) claims that investing in quality leadership training can pay off in higher student performance and lower principal turnover. Even after a full course of preparation, which typically ends in certification or licensure, new principals typically are not equipped for the challenges and the opportunities new principals face at school, according to Browne-Ferrigno (2003). Principal preparation programs are unable to keep up with the ever-changing role of principal and are not producing principals ready to take over a school. There is a need to overhaul the current approach to principal preparation programs so that a highly effective principal is at each school (Gill, 2012; Grigsby et al., 2010; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Mendels & Mitang, 2013; New Leaders, 2013; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). There are several practices for principal preparation programs to consider improving outcomes including: (a) focusing on leadership standards and improved curriculum for the principal preparation

program, (b) providing hands on experiences in the form of quality internships and practicums, (c) partnering with districts to align with their needs, and (d) recruiting and selecting of candidates into the preparation programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Chiang et al., 2020; Gill, 2012; Grigby et al., 2010; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Huang et al., 2012; New Leaders, 2013).

The first recommendation is to align the preparation program with a focus on leadership standards. The Florida Principal Leadership Standards form the foundation for school leader preparation programs in the state of Florida (FLDOE, 2022a). The standards provide expectations for effective school principals and assistant principals. There are a total of eight standards:

- **Standard 1-Professional and Ethical Norms.** Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote the academic success and well-being of all students.
- **Standard 2-Vision and Mission.** Effective educational leaders collaborate with parents, students, and other stakeholders to develop, communicate, and enact a shared vision, mission, and core values to promote the academic success and well-being of all students.
- **Standard 3-School Operations, Management, and Safety.** Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to cultivate a safe school environment and promote the academic success and well-being of all students.
- **Standard 4-Student Learning and Continuous School Improvement.** Effective educational leaders enable continuous improvement to promote the academic success and well-being of all students.

- **Standard 5- *Learning Environment*.** Effective educational leaders cultivate a caring, rigorous, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of all students.
- **Standard 6- *Recruitment and Professional Learning*.** Effective educational leaders build the collective and individual professional capacity of school personnel by creating support systems and offering professional learning to promote the academic success and well-being of all students.
- **Standard 7- *Building Leadership Expertise*.** Effective educational leaders cultivate, support, and develop other school leaders to promote the academic success and well-being of all students.
- **Standard 8- *Meaningful Parent, Family, and Community Engagement*.** Effective educational leaders utilize multiple means of reciprocal communication to build relationships and collaborate with parents, families, and other stakeholders to promote the academic success and well-being of all students.

These recently revised standards provide a framework for principal and assistant preparation programs to develop their curriculum. A review of preparation programs should ensure that the new standards drive the curriculum and that candidates receive necessary instruction to succeed in the principal role (Corcoran, 2017). Many principal preparation programs focus strictly on content knowledge rather than the application of that knowledge. Preparation programs will need to analyze their current curriculum to meet a wider range of demands on new leaders' knowledge of teaching and learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Darling-Hammond (2007) found that many programs are missing “the design of instruction and

professional development, organizational design of schools that promote teacher and student learning, or the requirements of building communities across diverse school stakeholders” (p. 5). The best preparation programs can blend coursework around instructional leadership with intensive field experiences to help blend research with practice (Davis & Leon, 2011; Orr, 2011).

Another key component of an effective principal preparation program is to provide hands-on experiences usually through an internship model. Some of the best programs provide either a full-time or part-time internship experience (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). These internship experiences give aspiring leaders a glimpse into the day-to-day experiences of a principal (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2006; Duncan et al., 2011). As with most programs, program quality is an important factor. Not all internship programs are of equal quality. The quality ratings of internships varied the most compares to other preparation program features (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Orr, 2011). The different principal preparation programs throughout the United States offer a varied degree of the internship with some programs being more intentional than others. Programs that use specific procedures for selecting mentors and guiding the internship activities are most successful (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2006; Duncan et al., 2011). It is important that school districts work with universities to design the intern activities to ensure universities are meeting the needs of the district and school program (Browne-Ferrigno and Muth, 2004; Geisman et al., 2000; Pounder and Crow 2005; Zellner et al., 2002). School districts also play a significant role in ensuring appropriate mentor selection and providing training on the role of a mentor. Recent principal candidate interns reported a dissatisfaction in the internship experience. This dissatisfaction was attributed to an inconsistency in the coursework to the actual work at the school, interactions with principals who did not have an instructional focus

or who were not willing to allow the interns to engage in tasks, and frustration with the principal who did not seem to know what to do with the intern (Clayton, 2012; Daresh, 2004; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). This supports the need for careful selection of principal mentors and the need for training so that the mentors are prepared to work with the interns effectively. Those who can provide a high-quality program and high-quality internship will see improved leadership practices in their candidates.

Collaboration with school districts is an essential element of a strong principal preparation program. Having dialogue with the school districts on their needs for school principals will help ensure that principals leave the program ready to be successful. Chiang et al. (2020) posits that strong, sustainable district-partnerships allow districts to take a more active role in developing the curriculum, setting expectations, and aligning preparation with the initiatives of the district. These district and university partnerships assist with the development and implementation of quality programs and professional development for school principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

The recruitment and selection of participants into the principal preparation programs is another area of focus. Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2006) found that selective admission of candidates based on previous leadership experiences (such as teacher leader, school coach, etc.) and career aspirations (wanting to be a school leader) improved outcomes of participants. Candidate selection looks at academic history instead of experiences or leadership potential. A selective, more probing process for choosing candidates would improve the quality of the principal pool and increase principal retention (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Gill, 2012; Mitang, 2012).

Principal preparation programs are important to the pipeline development of school principals. Orr (2011) found that the quality of training for aspiring leaders influences what aspiring leaders learn and how successful aspiring leaders are as a principal. Programs should incorporate the elements of: (a) a focus on leadership standards and improved curriculum, (b) providing hands on experiences, (c) partnering with districts, and (d) recruitment and selection into the programs will help improve outcomes for candidates.

Informal Mentoring

Outside of the principal preparation programs, informal mentorship is another way to build strong leaders. Parylo et al. (2012) suggests that principals can identify teachers in their buildings who show strong leadership skills and begin to mentor the teachers into the principalship. This strategy is effective in building leadership continuity in a district and to build the leadership pipeline (Parylo). Another way to use mentorship to develop strong principals is through the assistant principals. High quality mentoring and induction for assistant principals is vital (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016). Ensuring new assistant principals are not with any principal, but in a school where there is an experienced mentor can help “bridge the gap” between what they learn in school and what they need to do in practice to become an effective principal in the future (Liang & Augustine-Shaw).

Assistant Principal Experiences

Where new principals serve as assistant principals and the experiences they encounter during that time influence the effectiveness of new principals (Bastian & Henry, 2015). The original role of the assistant principal was to assist the principal. Assistant principals managed a lot of the tasks that the principal did not have time for or did not deem as important. Unfortunately,

some assistant principals are still stuck in the role of simply helping the principal wherever needed. Many of the tasks assistant principals conduct are related to management of people, particularly students, reacting to needs and problem-solving (Hausman et al., 2001). Instructional leadership tasks make up the least amount of time. The assistant principal role should be the training ground for future principals and therefore assistant principals need challenging assignments that prepare for the role of principal (Barnett et al., 2012; Hausman et al., 2001; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). This is particularly important in districts where principals are directly hired from the assistant principal pool. Bastian and Henry (2015) found that many first-year principals are “homegrown” and had previously worked in the same district as assistant principals or teachers. If this is the case, districts can do more to provide the necessary experiences to assistant principals to make successful principals. One approach for principals is to allocate meaningful instructional leadership responsibilities and proper professional development opportunities to their assistants to help them develop competencies needed to become successful principals (Barnett et al., 2012; Parylo et al., 2012; Shoho & Barnett, 2010).

Personal Experiences

Outside of professional experiences, one’s life experiences can play a vital role in the development of a leader. There are limited studies on life experience as a leadership development tool in the field of education, however the following studies on leadership also apply to education. This section will focus on leadership growth through lived and crucible experiences.

Avolio (1994), a major contributor to experiential learning, conducted a qualitative study looking at the correlation between life experiences and transformational leadership among

community members. The analysis resulted in seven life experience themes affecting leadership: (a) life satisfaction, (b) parental interest, (c) moral standards of parents, (d) parental description, (e) high school extracurricular participation, (f) school experience, and (g) positive work experience.

Janson (2008) in a quantitative study examined the impact of formative experiences on the development of leadership capacity. Janson defined leadership formative experiences (LFEs) as those experiences which made a high impact on leaders, resulting in learning relevant to their leadership. A crucial finding was that only five out of 198 LFE concerned formal leadership development courses or workshops. Other results show the telling of formative stories from three perspectives, focusing on self, others, and work context.

Nash and Bangert (2013) in a quantitative study collected surveys from 212 public school principals using the Lifetime Leadership Inventory (LLI). The LLI looked at seven factors that assessed leaders' antecedent life experiences. The seven factors were: (1) early leadership development experiences, (2) relationships with mentors, (3) relationships with parents, (4) exploratory experiences, (5) crucible experiences, (6) early/previous work experiences and (7) experience with sports. The analysis revealed that early work experiences and interactions with mentors had the largest relationships with participants transformational leadership behaviors.

Besides the life experiences described above, leaders can also learn through adversity, or crucibles. Bennis and Thomas (2002) defined the crucible as "a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or altered sense of identity" (p. 40). Thomas (2008) elaborates by saying that crucibles are more like trials or tests that individuals go through that cause individuals to question who they are. Thomas produced three types of crucibles that can

impact a person: (a) new territory, (b) reversal, and (c) suspension. In new territory, individuals come across something new and perfect their skill at sense-making during confusion. Reversal involves learning from loss, impairment, defeat or failure and suspension is a long period of deliberation that challenges one to clarify their values (Thomas).

Shannon et al. (2020) in a qualitative study of thirteen authentic leaders found that trigger events and leadership crucibles play a significant role in authentic leadership development. An important finding in this study was the fact that personal trigger events and crucibles helped shape authentic leadership characteristics even more than job-related triggers or crucibles. Crucible moments, especially ones where individuals had to rely on character to overcome challenges, are necessary for the success of a leader (Byrne et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2020; Thomas, 2008). Byrne et al. (2018) also share that it is not just the act of experiencing a crucible that is impactful, it is the ability of the individual to make sense of those moments.

Chapter Summary

This chapter contained a review of the literature related to principals and principal development. The literature presented the following themes: (1) impact of effective principals, (2) historical and contemporary roles and responsibilities of elementary principals, (3) principal development and support, (4) principal challenges, (5) principal turnover, (6) professional experiences, (7) personal experiences. Based on the review of the literature, there is enough support to say that principals play a significant role in the effectiveness of schools and that the role of principal is everchanging and challenging. As evidenced by the literature, it is prudent to study the lived experiences of principals (past, present, and future) to better support and retain new principals.

The purpose of this current study was to explore the lived experiences of new elementary school principals. Through gaining an understanding of the events, perceptions and meanings new principals make of their experiences, it may be possible to increase our knowledge of how new principals work through the multi-faceted job, and better understand what types of experiences may be influencing their development as a school principal. Increasing our knowledge of new principal experiences that influence their development into effective leaders could help inform how we develop effective principals in the future.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of the current study is to explore the lived experiences of new elementary school principals. The research questions that guided the research are: How do new principals experience the principalship and what personal and professional experiences influence the role of principalship? In this chapter, I describe how I conducted this study. First, I describe the rationale for using qualitative research and a phenomenological theoretical framework in this study. Second, I describe the design of the study, my research questions, the selection of participants, and my data collection and analysis process. Finally, I outline how I verified my study's trustworthiness and quality.

Qualitative Research

The historic origin of qualitative research comes from anthropology, sociology, the humanities, and evaluation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hatch 2002; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative work in the field of education began to develop in the 1970s and 1980s (Hatch, 2002). "Qualitative research is a methodology that aims to understand human behavior and more specifically the beliefs, perceptions, and motivations that guide decision-making and behavior" (Harkiolakis, 2020, p. 23). Central to qualitative research is the idea that the individuals in the study are the experts in relation to their own experiences (Jacoby & Gonazales, 1991; van Manen, 2018).

While traditional quantitative research collects data through surveys, questionnaires, checklists, and other measuring devices, qualitative research collects data directly by the researcher themselves (Hatch, 2002). The logic behind researcher-as-instrument approach is that "human capacities necessary to participate in social life are the same capacities that enable

qualitative researchers to make sense of the actions, intentions, and understandings of those being studied” (Hatch, 2002, p. 7). Another characteristic of some qualitative research is to complete the research in a natural setting. This means that the researcher is physically present with the people in a community, institution, or other context where the experience and behavior occur (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Because qualitative research “concerns interactions amongst individuals,” it is based on a constructivist epistemological stance and heavily reflects the relativist ontological perspective (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative research is “both descriptive and analytic in that researchers are interested in understanding, describing, and ultimately analyzing the complex processes, meanings, and understandings that people have and make within their experiences, contexts, and milieus” (Ravitch & Carl, p. 9).

This study takes a qualitative approach because I am interested in the lived experiences of new principals. I, as the researcher, collected the data myself through interviews, rather than through instruments such as surveys or questionnaires as used in quantitative research. Interviews were chosen because at the root of interviews “is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2019, p. 9). I interviewed the new principals in their natural settings, the elementary schools in which they serve. I seek to understand the world of new principals from the perspectives of those who are living in it.

Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology

Phenomenological research is “interested in an analytical and descriptive experience of phenomena by individuals in their everyday world” (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 251). This study is

grounded in phenomenology. The study establishes a research focus on understanding the lived experiences of new principals. A key characteristic of phenomenological research is the “rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated” (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 252). To gain perspectives from new principals of their experiences with the role of principal and the challenges that come with the role, phenomenology was selected as the appropriate qualitative methodology to describe those experiences.

Phenomenology emerged as an influential philosophical school in the later part of the nineteenth century and is credited to Edmund Husserl. Husserl (2017) stated in his seminal work *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, “the sole task and service of phenomenology is to clarify the meaning of this world” (p. 21). In phenomenological science a relationship always exists between external perceptions and internal memories and judgements (Moustakas, 1994). This approach relies on individual experiences and therefore the stories come from the participants voices and not those of the researcher or from individuals reporting studies in the literature, an approach consistent with human science research (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

There are two main types of phenomenology: transcendental and hermeneutic. In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher seeks to obtain an unbiased view of the collected data. Whereas, in hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher’s opinions are important to the interpretation of the data. Transcendental phenomenology is the specific type of phenomenology used in this study. Husserl (2017) considered transcendental phenomenology to be a suitable alternative to the scientific method of inquiry. He believed by using this method, “one could delve into consciousness and uncover the underlying structures of a phenomenon” (Eddles-

Hirsch, 2015, p. 252). Two concepts that Husserl considered important were intentionality and essences (Moustakas, 1994). Intentionality, Husserl believed, represented the researcher's conscious intent to investigate a phenomenon. The researcher must direct their attention to the phenomenon at hand. In Husserl's description of intentionality, he shares that every intentional experience consists of a noema and noesis. The noema represents the objective experience of the object, whereas the noesis represents the subjective experience (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). An example of this would be if two principals attend the same course on tough conversations, the noema would be the "what" of the training and the noesis would be how the two principals perceived and experienced the course. In phenomenological research, the researcher must understand noema and noesis to understand the experiences of the participants. Once the researcher understands the what and how of an experience, they can put together the essence of the experience. The essence is "the elements that are common among all of the participants and is an essential aspect of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100).

I selected the transcendental phenomenology approach for my study because the design and methods match my goal of understanding the lived experiences of new principals. It is a useful method to use when the researcher has identified a phenomenon to understand and has individuals who can provide a description of what they have experienced (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The data gathered will give the field of education detailed descriptions of the role of a new principal and the experiences that have influenced that role.

Design of the Study

Research Questions

According to Hatch (2002), identifying the research question of a study is critical because the research question gives the study direction, limits the scope of the study, and provides a way to evaluate progress and completion. When writing a qualitative research question, Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest using a broad question that asks for an exploration of a central phenomenon or concept. “The intent is to explore the general, complex set of factors surrounding the central phenomenon and present the broad, varied perspectives or meanings that participants hold” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 133). Moustakas (1994) adds that a qualitative research question seeks to reveal the essences and meanings of human experience and it does not seek to predict or determine causal relationships.

This research study examines the experience of the principalship from the perspective of new principals. The focus of this study is based on personal and professional experiences that have influenced the role of the principalship. The following research questions guided this study:

How do new principals (years 1-3) experience the principalship and what personal and professional experiences have influenced the role of the principalship?

Selection of Participants

This study focuses its inquiry on a qualitative phenomenological study design that details five new principals lived experiences and those personal and professional experiences that influenced their principalship role. This research applies a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of new principals and the meaning they derived from those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2018). McCall (2004) believes that the primary

source of learning to lead is through experience. The mission of this study is to explore that further by analyzing the experiences of the new principals. Phenomenology made it possible to gather the experiences of the new principals and make meaning of those experiences.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicate that “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 185). In this study purposeful sampling was used. This means that the researcher chose participants for a specific reason that comes from the core constructs of the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This is appropriate because it is a phenomenological study that requires participants to have a shared experience. Participants received a questionnaire to recruit 5-6 participants that have the shared experiences. The questionnaire helped identify new principals in years 1-3, working at a school rated as an A, B, or C according to the state of Florida school grading system, and have had the experience of being an assistant principal in the same county they are currently principal.

Finally, in designing this study, I anticipated I would have some difficulty in identifying enough participants because I currently am a supervisor of principals in this district and wanted to work with principals who I did not supervise. I also wanted to select participants who worked in the same types of schools in the district and wanted to select principals who were within their first three years of the principalship, which limited my pool. I ended up reaching out to six new principals in regions other than my own and five agreed to the study.

Informed Consent

Consent entails that “other than in exceptional circumstances, participants agree to research before it commences. That consent should be both informed and voluntary” (Israel and Hay, 2018). Participants received informed consent in written form. Participants received information regarding a brief overview of the research goals, the benefits and risks of the research study, and a statement about the voluntary aspect of the research study. Participants understood that there was no financial compensation for participating in the study. Participants received a statement so that they were aware that all data collected in the study would remain confidential. Finally, there was a statement regarding how to withdraw from the study at any point and contact information for the researcher. Participants signed the consent form indicating that they read the consent form and agreed to participate in the study. A copy of the informed consent is in Appendix C.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is related to an individual’s privacy and entails decisions about how and what data related to participants is in the final paper (Sieber, 1992). The standard assumption in in-depth interviews is that the participants will remain unidentified (Seidman, 2019). In this study, pseudonyms for the participants’ names helped safeguard their identity. However, through deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009), it may be possible to identify the participants due to the unique experiences described in the study. Participants understand this possibility and could read the parts related to them to make sure they were comfortable with the information shared.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study in the Spring of 2021. The pilot study helped me examine each aspect of the study with a smaller participant pool. After going through the pilot study and going over the findings, I have been able to adapt my research questions to better focus on the objectives of the study. I was able to engage in the three-series interview process described by Seidman (2019) with two different participants. This helped me see that the 90-minute interview was appropriate for the questions in my interview guide and did not seem too long for participants. As I went through the interview guide, I wrote down additional questions and probing questions so that I could refine the interview guide. All these changes helped to create a new interview guide to better capture the experiences of the participants and answer the research questions. The interviews for the pilot study were done online through Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19. Although this method was beneficial in terms of getting a good transcription, I felt that the interviews would be more substantial in person where I could connect better with the participant, so I decided the actual study would be conducted in person.

The pilot study also allowed me to practice the data analysis process used in phenomenological research. I am much better prepared to use this process in the larger study now that I have a better understanding of each part. I am comfortable with horizontalization, phenomenological reduction and elimination, textural descriptions, and structural descriptions. I learned that I need to go deeper with the synthesis of meanings and essence's part and make sure I connect back to research and my experiences.

The findings from the pilot study revealed four major themes related to the phenomenon of being a new principal. These themes were: (1) important roles, (2) challenges, (3) beneficial experiences, and (4) supports utilized when dealing with challenging situations. Some of the important roles that participants named were implementing change, instructional leadership, culture and climate, safety, and managerial tasks. Some challenges included dealing with teachers, dealing with parents, apprehension and lack of confidence, and COVID-19. The beneficial experiences that came out of the pilot study included teaching and leadership roles, coaching, connections with previous leaders and mentors, and tough conversations. As far as the supports utilized when dealing with challenging situations, the participants shared that they turned to mentors and other principals, region leadership, and their school-based teams for support. These findings have helped to inform my current study as I reshaped the overall purpose of my study to be more geared to the professional and personal experiences that influence the role of a new principal.

Data Collection

In the summer of 2022 and the fall of 2023, I conducted a series of interviews with five new principals selected to participate in this study. Both the school names and participant names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) posits that interviews are at the center of qualitative research since they “provide deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data that are centrally important to qualitative research” (p. 128). For this reason, I decided to use interviews to collect data for this study. More specifically, I used Seidman’s (2019) structure for in-depth,

phenomenological interviewing. This method combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology (Seidman). In an interview like this, it is common to use mostly open-ended questions. This interviewing process includes a three-interview series (Seidman). The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experiences, the second interview allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience in the context in which it occurs, and the third interview encourages participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences hold for them (Seidman). The three interviews took place over a 3-month period and each of the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Seidman suggests a 90-minute interview format. His rationale is that using an hour "carries with it the consciousness of a standard unit of time that can have participants "watching the clock" (p. 26). Seidman felt that two hours would be too long for participants to sit for an interview. In the pilot study, I found it quite easy to interview for the 90 minutes. Participants seemed to want to continue to talk about their experiences when the 90 minutes had ended. For this study, I used a range of 60-90 minutes and gauged the time based on the participant responses. I used an interview guide to drive the semi-structured interviews. The interview guide is in Appendix C.

I used bracketing in this study where I set aside or suspended any presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I used journaling to record my thoughts and ideas before and after the interviews to help clear my mind. By using bracketing, I can "create new ideas, new feelings, new awareness's, and understandings" (Moustakas, p.86). It allows me to see the phenomenon for what it is and not what I think it should be.

The first interview focuses on the life history of the participant. The participants describe their childhood experiences, experiences through college, teaching experiences and assistant

principal experiences. This interview covered all experiences that had occurred prior to the participants becoming a principal that may be related to becoming a principal. Some examples of questions are:

1. Tell me about your experiences in elementary school as a child.
2. What experiences do you recall in middle and high school? How did you feel about those years in school?
3. How was your experience as a teacher? Think of positive and negative experiences.
4. How was your assistant principal experience and how did you get to the principal role?

By asking them “how,” I hoped to “have them reconstruct and narrate a range of constitutive events in their past family, school, and work experience” that have influenced their role as principal (Seidman, 2019, p. 22).

The second semi-structured interview allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience in their current context. In this interview, I asked participants to describe their current experiences as a principal and to describe a “day in the life” of a new principal.

Specifically, I asked some of the following questions:

1. What are some of the important tasks or roles of being a school principal?
2. Which roles are easiest, and which are the most challenging?
3. Describe experiences you have had that have helped you navigate through the easy and challenging parts of the job.
4. What does the day in the life of a principal look like? Describe your typical day.

When we ask participants what their experience is like, “we are asking them to reconstruct their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions, most of which they take for granted during their experience of the day” (Seidman, 2019, p. 22).

The third interview encourages participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 2019). “Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors of their lives interacted to bring them, not necessarily in a straight line, to their present situation” (Seidman, 2019, p. 24). In this interview, I asked participants to reflect on the last two interviews. I asked questions such as:

1. What are some things that you have learned through this experience?
2. Based on what you have learned, what does it mean for your future as a principal?
3. As someone who is responsible for developing future leaders, what experiences do you feel you should make sure they have before the principalship?

In qualitative research, it is best to record interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hatch, 2002; Seidman, 2019). Seidman (2019) believes “that to work most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text to study” (p. 123). In this study, a smart phone voice recorder captured each interview and then transcriptions done as soon as possible after the interview.

I made a transcription of each interview using a specific transcription protocol (Poland, 2002). Poland stresses the importance of “ensuring the accuracy of verbatim accounts by minimizing sources of error in the transcription process” (p. 268). The sources of errors typically found in transcription are usually around language use, pauses, vocal tone, and unclear words. The transcription protocol outlines how to address language used in the interview, pauses in the

interview, vocal tone, and unclear words. An example strategy for interpreting unclear words is to use phrases immediately before and after the unclear word and to use whatever other knowledge I have about the context of the interview to identify the word (Poland). To ensure the best quality of audio-recording, I chose a quiet location free of disruptions and background noise. Another way to ensure high quality transcription was to read each transcription while listening to the audio recording to ensure validity of the transcription prior to beginning any data analysis. I corrected all the errors in the transcriptions using this process.

Data Analysis

The chosen system for data analysis is Moustakas's (1994) method following a transcendental phenomenology design. Moustakas (1994) offers a systematic approach to analyzing data. The researcher describes their experiences with the phenomenon, identifies significant statements from transcripts, and then clusters these statements into meaning units and themes. The researcher then synthesizes the meaning units and themes into a description of the experiences, and then constructs a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience. I chose this data analysis method because its systematic approach helped me understand the lived experiences of new principals and how their personal and professional experiences influenced their role as principal.

More specifically, I followed the following steps to analyze the 15 interviews from the five participants. First, I prepared a transcript of each of the interviews and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Then I highlighted all words, phrases, and sentences that were relevant to answering the research questions. The next step was to eliminate any repeated words, phrases, or sentences or items that were not relevant to the questions. Once these steps were completed, I

read through all the highlighted parts that were left and wrote a short phrase in the margin on how this part helped to answer the research questions. I then cut apart the transcripts and began to make meaning of the words by grouping the data into similar concepts using my notes in the margins. This took a long time as I had to think about the similarities, differences, and connections between the meaning units and determine which group to leave them in. Once I grouped the words, phrases, and sentences, I created a name for each group. This information was then put into a t-chart or codebook, which then helped me to write about my findings. A sample of the codebook can be found in appendix E. The formal method derived from Moustakas (1994) is described below.

Epoche

The first step in phenomenological analysis is epoche. Epoche is an ancient Greek word meaning “suspension of judgement.” Moustakas (1994) states:

the researcher following a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the Epoche process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies- to be completely open, receptive, and naive in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (p. 22).

This step is like the role and reflexivity of the researcher, where there is a discussion on past experiences and how these past experiences shape interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This step is important because it will help readers understand the position, influences, and bias the researcher brings to the study.

Researcher's Epoche and Subjectivity Statement. I have many personal and professional experiences that have formed my views on the role of principal and the experiences that help influence the role. As a young child, I already knew that I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. I was the child that stayed after school to help the teacher with anything she needed, and in return she gave me extra worksheets to use at home to play teacher. It was in my early elementary years that I grew a fondness for teaching. As I went through middle and high school, I still wanted to be a teacher and took my education very seriously. I had many struggles in my personal life at home and found education as my one escape. I have always been the one to turn in all assignments in on time and excel in my classes without the aid of anyone motivating me to be my best. I did not take on any leadership roles as a child. I was incredibly quiet and reserved. I kept to myself most of the time. When I went into college, I still aspired to become a teacher. As I was going to college, I took on a few different jobs to pay for school. These jobs were in the food industry, and I found myself finding my voice and leadership in these positions. At the first restaurant I worked in, I started as a dining room server and worked my way up to dining room manager. In the next place I worked at, I was a dining room server, then a hostess, and ended as the dining room supervisor. My individual work ethic and motivation helped to propel me into leadership roles in these jobs.

In college I studied special education and received my certificate in Emotionally Handicapped K-12. I graduated from a public college in a southern state and then moved back home to take my first teaching position. I worked for five years at a challenging elementary

school working with students with emotional and behavior disorders (EBD). Within just a few years as a teacher, I found myself taking on leadership roles at the school. I participated on the leadership team, shared governance team, and was the lead for our special education program. Participating on the school-based teams helped me learn many skills. First, I learned how to delegate tasks while working on a team. It is always quite easy to just say you will do all the work, but I learned quickly that doing all the work leads to burnout and does not build a sustainable team. Another thing I learned while taking on leadership roles was how to listen to the voices of others. It was important to hear different points of views on topics to make appropriate decisions. Decisions that would meet most of the needs of the team members. Finally, participating on the school-based teams helped me learn to deal with conflict with adults. An example of this was when I was the lead for the ESE department at my school. I wanted to allow more inclusion opportunities for my students who were in a self-contained EBD classroom. I continued to see how their behaviors were getting worse by being only with students who were exhibiting poor behaviors. Many of the general education teachers were not supportive of my initiative. There were many heated discussions as many teachers felt strongly about not allowing my students in their classrooms. I worked through this conflict by going very slowly. I developed a plan for just a few students on a trial basis and I gave appropriate support to the trial teachers. I also followed up with the teachers weekly to discuss what was going well and what was not going well. I helped them to troubleshoot problems and helped to celebrate the successes. The more negative teachers were able to see the remarkable things happening with our trial inclusion and slowly some began to change their view.

I also served as a mentor to new teachers in our school and was the Teacher of the Year in my fourth year of teaching. After my fifth year of teaching, I began to serve as a specialist for the county in reading and it was then that I really got to work with adults. As a specialist for the district, I collaborated with principals and teachers to improve reading skills in students with disabilities. I was able to collect and analyze data, use the data to help schools make important educational decisions, and coach teachers in the classroom on best practices in reading. This experience gave me perspective on how to work with resistant adults and the change process. One example of this was when I had to meet with a principal because the teachers in the school were not following the reading program with fidelity. In this meeting, it became noticeably clear that the principal did not support the reading program and therefore did not require her teachers to use it with fidelity. The principal was very abrupt and did not want to hear anything I said. I took this information to my supervisor and asked for guidance on how to move forward. She gave me some next steps that included providing data to the principal in support of using the reading program with students just like hers. I also invited the principal and the teachers to observe the program in action at a neighboring school. The principal finally agreed for me to work directly with one grade level. Once I got that grade level up and running with the program, I was able to show the impact of the program on the principal's students and she then went schoolwide. I learned through this experience that building relationships with resistant adults and showing them, instead of telling them, can work positively for change. During this time, I also began to work on my master's degree in educational leadership. I was again going through some personal struggles at home and knew I needed to do something for myself to earn more money in the future.

The year I finished my master's degree, I had decided to go back into the classroom. I was realizing that working at the district level took me away from working with children and that is really what I wanted to be doing. I interviewed at a school and became a teacher for an EBD classroom. During the summer, while I was waiting to start my new teaching job, I gave a district presentation on the benefits of a reading program with students of disabilities. Once the presentation was over, one of the Region Superintendents came up to me and asked me who I was and what I wanted to do with my career. I explained that I had just finished my master's degree and she was so impressed with my presentation that she said she had to find me a leadership position at once. It just so happened that the principal that I was going to work for as a teacher was at the meeting and said she was looking for an assistant principal and became her assistant principal on the spot.

I had a wonderful experience as an assistant principal, in part due to the wonderful relationship I had with my principal. She included me in every aspect of the school and did not just assign me the things she did not want to do. We were truly partners running the school together. There are so many things that I do today that I learned from my time with her. I had opportunities and experiences in dealing with difficult parents, difficult teachers, working through professional development with teachers, evaluations of teachers, data collection and analysis, and culture building to name a few. She didn't have to do these things with me, but she knew if I wanted to be a successful principal one day, I needed to do them. After two years with her, I became the principal at the same school. I do feel that through the experiences my previous leader gave me as an assistant principal, I was well-prepared to take on this new role as principal.

Being a new principal is an overwhelming experience, even if you feel well-prepared going into it. I can remember feeling a sense of loneliness when my previous leader was no longer with me. I relied on her as someone to confide in and someone to give me guidance. I was still able to call her daily for advice, but she was no longer there to deal with the day-to-day emotions of a school day. I had my own assistant principal, but I had not formed a strong relationship with her yet and it just did not feel the same as my previous partnership. It took my first two years to really build that relationship with my assistant principal. Another challenge I remember is dealing with the teachers when they were unhappy with my decisions. I tended to take things personally and forget that they were mad at situations, not necessarily with me. It took me a while not to take their behaviors personally. I also remember just how hard the job of principal really was. It was very draining, and you could find yourself working long hours each day if you did not set boundaries for yourself. I promised myself that I would leave every day by 5:00pm after my first year, even if not finished with all tasks for the day. I would go home and be with my family for a few hours and then spend another two hours working at home. On the weekends, it was important to dedicate one day to family and one day for work. Figuring out balance, really helped me with feeling burned out. I enjoyed my first few years of the principalship and found success through increased student achievement and creating a team of teacher leaders in my building.

The review above shows the many personal and professional experiences I have had in relation to the phenomenon. My perceptions of the role of new principals in a southern school district are influenced by my various experiences and roles within the county. From 2005 to 2007 I served as an assistant principal. Leading up to that assignment, I participated in college

preparation programs and a district-led preparation program. From 2007-2019 I served as a principal in four different elementary schools. Currently, I serve as the Elementary Region Superintendent, where I supervise 35 principals. In this current role, I supervise four new principals who were all previously assistant principals in our district. One concern with my current role in relation to this study is that I am in a supervisory position, and I am an authority figure in the district. It may be difficult to get honest answers due to my authority over the schools. I intentionally selected participants that I do not directly supervise, but they may still see me as an authority figure.

As stated before, I used bracketing in this study where I set aside my own beliefs about the phenomenon. I journaled before and after the interviews to clear my mind of my own thoughts and experiences so that I could focus on the experiences of the participants. I do understand that due to my previous experiences and current role, I bring certain biases to this study. I made every effort to remain objective, however it is possible that these biases shaped my interpretations of the data collected. I entered this study with the hope that I would learn more about the perceptions of new principals and their readiness for the role.

Horizontalization

The next step in the data analysis process is horizontalization. This is when significant statements are identified in the transcripts that relate directly to the experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). These statements are taken from the transcripts and placed in a table so that the researcher can identify the different perspectives about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas describes the horizon as “the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinct character” (p. 95). In the analysis of the data, this takes the form of new horizons

arising as the previous one recedes: The statements are taken on their own and not forced into specific themes at this point. Moustakas states, “when we horizontalize, each phenomena have equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence” (p. 95). The process of horizontalization helps me, as the researcher, view the data as separate units and produce a clear meaning of the phenomenon.

Phenomenological Reduction and Elimination

In the process of reduction, it is important to review the data with an open mind and to consider the data from multiple perspectives. This next step of reduction and elimination first serves to delete any irrelevant statements or those that are repeating or overlapping. It serves to reduce the transcript to its most important parts in relation to the experience. The remaining statements are the horizons or textural meanings (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Moustakas (1994) also recommended that the researcher ask the following two questions when recording these statements, 1) “Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?”, 2) “Is it possible to abstract and label it?” (Moustakas, 1994, p.121). After the completion of reduction and elimination, the left-over meaning units form into themes for each participant. This step of the data process clearly puts together the experience of the participant.

Textural Description

The next step is to write a textural description for each of the participants. Moustakas (1994) describes the textural description as the “thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, situations that portray what comprises an experience” (p. 47). Using the thematic analysis, I described the “what” of the phenomenon to create the textural description. In this step Moustakas (1994),

recommends using the participants own words to convey the unique meanings of the phenomenon. This description is based off the exact words of the participants without any interpretations from myself. A composite textural description is then formed by combining the textural descriptions from each participant.

Structural Description

In this step, I used thematic analysis to describe the “how” of the phenomenon to create a structural description. Structural description involves the acts of thinking and judging, imagining, and recollecting, to arrive at structural meanings (Moustakas, 1994). I used imaginative variation in this step. Imaginative variation is the process of “seeking meanings through the utilization of imagination” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). In this stage, I reviewed the textural descriptions and tried to make deeper meaning out of the participants experiences through interpretation. These deeper meanings combine to form the structural description.

Synthesis of Meanings and Essences

The last step in the analysis process is to develop the essence of the experiences. Moustakas (1994) states, “The final step of the phenomenological research process is the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (p. 100). This represents the essences or invariant structures of the phenomenon researched. After reading this composite description, an individual should have a better understanding of what it is like to be a new principal and what personal and professional experiences could influence the role of principal.

Rigor, Credibility, and Trustworthiness

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the truth of the information shared by participants and interpreted by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2012). It is important that the reader can relate to the experiences shared in the study (Sandelowski, 1986). This study used three main strategies to ensure validity, trustworthiness, and credibility. The first step was to use data source triangulation. In this study, I analyzed data from multiple sources and compared them to one another. I specifically looked at data from one participant to another. I then established themes across the multiple data sources. Second, I conducted member checks throughout the study. Participants had an opportunity to review their transcripts and the analysis of their transcripts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checks one of the most important validity measures. Finally, I used researcher reflexivity to fully disclose the researcher's assumptions, beliefs, values, and biases. This self-reflection will resonate with the reader and create trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the methodology used in this phenomenological study. I described the characteristics of qualitative and phenomenological research and the reasons chosen for this study. I then described the selection of participants, my informed consent procedures, confidentiality procedures, how I collected data, and how I analyzed the data. I finished with detailing how I would ensure reliability, validity, and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of new principals and the personal and professional experiences that influence the role. This chapter provides the results of the phenomenological investigation conducted. To ensure confidentiality of the participants, the names of the participants and schools are changed. To provide an illustration of the lived experiences of a new principal, this chapter will present the textural descriptions of two new principals. The two principals chosen out of the five participating principals depict the essence of what it means to be a new principal as they had experiences similar to a typical new principal. Mary's prior experiences with teaching, coaching, and full exposure during her assistant principal years led to her selection. Jennifer was chosen because she had not served in an official coaching capacity and had limited exposure during her assistant principal years.

The findings open with a brief introduction of all five participants included in the study. The results of the analysis of Mary and Jennifer's interviews in the form of textural and structural descriptions for both individuals follow the introductions to the participants. Moustakas (1994) describes the textural description as the “thoughts, feelings, examples, ideas, situations that portray what comprises an experience” (p.47). This description is based off the exact words of the participants without any interpretation. The structural description is the act of thinking and judging, imagining, and recollecting, to arrive at structural meanings (Moustakas, 1994). It is where deeper meanings are made through interpretation. Once the individual textural and structural descriptions are presented, the composite textural and structural descriptions of all the participants experiences are then presented. To respond to the research questions, the chapter

concludes with a description of the essence of the experiences of new principals and the personal and professional experiences that influence the role. The essence should give the reader a better understanding of what it is like to be a new principal and what personal and professional experiences influence the role of principal.

Participant Introductions

Mary

Mary is the principal of a Title I school in an urban school district. She is beginning her second year of the principalship. She attended school in this same district as a child and served as a teacher, coach, and assistant principal in this same district. Mary did not attend college to become a teacher, instead she graduated with a degree in mathematics. She worked in other professions before deciding on teaching. She taught for three years before becoming a math coach at an elementary school. She was a math coach for three years and then served as an assistant principal for five years before becoming a principal. Mary received her master's degree in educational leadership and participated in the district Aspiring Leaders program and Rising Leaders program to prepare for the roles of assistant principal and principal. She became the principal of her school through a principal forum and remains at the same school for year two.

Jennifer

Jennifer is the principal of a Title I school in an urban school district. She is beginning her second year of the principalship. She attended school in the same district as a child and served as a teacher and an assistant principal in the same district. She originally went to college for architecture and then changed her major to education. She taught for more than ten years before becoming an assistant principal and served as an assistant principal for five years. Jennifer

received her master's degree in educational leadership and participated in the district's Aspiring Leaders program and Rising Leaders program to prepare for the roles of assistant principal and principal. She became be the principal of her school through a principal forum and remains at the same school for year 2. Jennifer became the principal of the same school where she served as assistant principal.

Amy

Amy is the principal of a Title I school in an urban school district. She is beginning her second year of the principalship. She attended school in the same district as a child, served as a teacher and an assistant principal in the same district. She originally went to college for pre-med and then changed her major to education. She taught for more than five years before becoming an assistant principal and then served as an assistant principal for three years. Amy received her master's degree in elementary education and participated in the district's Aspiring Leaders program and Rising Leaders program to prepare for the roles of assistant principal and principal. Amy became the principal of her school through a principal forum and remains at the same school for year two.

Maggie

Maggie is the principal of a Title I school in an urban school district. She is beginning her second year of the principalship. She did not grow up in the same district where she is principal and has never taught there. She has served as an instructional coach and as an assistant principal in the district she is now in. She majored in education in college. She taught for many years before becoming an assistant principal and then served as an assistant principal for six years. Maggie received her master's degree in reading and educational leadership and did not

participate in the district's Aspiring Leaders program and Rising Leaders program to prepare for the roles of assistant principal and principal. Maggie became the principal of her school through a principal forum and transferred to a different school for year two.

Kelly

Kelly is the principal of a Title I school in an urban school district. She is beginning her third year of the principalship. She did not grow up in the same district where she is principal. She has served as a teacher, instructional coach and as an assistant principal in the district she is now in. She majored in economics and finance in college. Her interest in education came through Teach for America. She taught for three years before becoming a coach and then quickly moved into the assistant principal role where she served as an assistant principal for five years. Kelly received her master's degree in educational leadership and participated in the district's Rising Leaders program to prepare for the role of principal. She became principal at her first school by appointment from district leadership and then Kelly transferred to another school for year three due to her success improving a high needs school.

Mary's Textural Description

This section will present a textural description of Mary's personal and professional experiences that have influenced her role as principal. The textural description is given using Mary's words with no interpretation. The experiences have been broken down into the following categories: (1) growing up, (2) personal school experiences, (3) prior work experience, (4) teaching experience, (5) coaching experience, (6) assistant principal experience, (7) personal characteristics, (8) track for principalship, (9) principal selection, (10) emotions, (11) roles of principalship, (12) a day in the life of a new principal, (13) feeling success, (14) challenges, (15)

work-life balance, (16) feedback, (17) principal supports, (18) looking towards the future, and (19) reflections on being a new principal.

Growing Up

Mary grew up in a diverse, urban city in northern Florida. She spent many of her early years living with her grandmother and mother. She attended both public school and private school during her K-6 years. Mary described having a challenging time making friends in school because she was an introvert. She shared, “I didn’t make friends easily, if you didn’t talk to me, I didn’t talk to you.” Mary was the oldest child of six and had a lot of responsibilities at home. Mary was placed in foster care and removed from her family in middle school. She went to one home with two of her siblings. This lasted for two years and then Mary went home to her mother.

Personal School Experiences

Mary loved school throughout her K-12 experience. She transitioned through quite a few schools, but all within the same school district. In third grade, she attended a private school and was on their basketball team. She remembered this being a time that she began to make friends in school, due to sports. She described herself as “not a very smart person,” but she realized this and made up for it by working extremely hard. Her grandmother worked at local college and so Mary spent a lot of time there. This gave her early aspirations of going to college and she wanted to be just like her grandmother and study math.

Middle school years were challenging for Mary due to the removal from her home and placement in foster care. She shared, “that was a really rough time, but I still liked going to school, it was more of a refuge for me.” Her foster parent was a teacher and so Mary ended up going to her school during middle school. It was in middle school where Mary tried many

different extra-curricular activities. She was on the swim team, softball team, volleyball team, basketball team, and was in the choir. In all the sports, Mary wanted to be the best. She said, “I wanted to be the best, I still don’t think I was the best, but I had the desire and I worked hard.”

High school was more stable for Mary. She returned to living with her mom and siblings. Mary was in the choir, ROTC, and on the tv production crew. While on the tv production crew she learned how to make money through fundraising. She said, “Ms. Wendy is a legend. She taught us how to make money, like fundraising, she was like, if you want it, you got to work for it.” Mary again stated, “I wasn’t the smartest, but I knew I wanted to go to college. I did just enough in high school to get into somebody’s college.”

Mary went to college for engineering because her grandfather was an engineer. She was in a dual degree program for engineering and math. The math portion was at a HBCU (Historically Black College and University) in Florida and then she transferred to PWI (Predominantly White Institute) in Florida for the engineering part. She did very well at the HBCU. She felt comfortable with her classmates and the content she was learning. However, when she went to the PWI, she described facing a culture shock. She said:

Most of my high school and elementary years were at African American populated schools. And so, when I got to this new college, it was totally different. At the HBCU, it was like home. It was very family oriented. Everybody helped everybody. You get to the new school and number one, I was the only female in the class, and number two, I was the only Black person in the class. It was hard for me to get in a study group because they all had their clique, so I decided I did not want to do this work.

So, Mary stayed with the math degree and graduated from the HBCU.

Prior Work Experience

Mary worked during her college years to pay for college. She worked for a woman who owned her own business. She said, “she basically showed me business strategies and she let me run her business for a while. I learned a lot through that experience, and I tell her to this day like, ‘I really appreciate you for giving me that opportunity because it helped me hustle’.” It was a design center and Mary learned to deal with customers and come out of her shell. This inspired her to create her own business which was a tutoring company. She started her tutoring company after college when she moved to another state. While in this new state, Mary also got involved in Toastmasters International, which is an organization that helps you with public speaking. It was here that she “learned how to present myself and be social a little bit.” It helped to build up her confidence and it really became a passion for her. Mary began to realize that she was not doing what she was supposed to be doing. She was learning a lot about “living through your purpose and your passion” and knew she wanted something different. She was trying to find her way and then also became pregnant. Mary decided then to move back home. When she moved back home, she continued her tutoring business, but also started working at an apartment community. This was always a dream job of hers. She saw it as a challenge and worked to meet the challenge. Then one day she just decided that she could be a math teacher and went after this new goal.

Teaching Experience

Mary became a math teacher at a middle school in the same county she grew up in. She loved her first year of teaching and felt very supported by the school’s leadership team. She

described it as being tough, but “not tougher than me.” She described two of her biggest challenges as having to change her 1:1 tutoring approach to a more whole group style and time management. She said, “so I had to figure out how to manage my time. That was hard. That was the biggest challenge, managing time and being very strategic about what you are going to teach and how you are going to teach it in 60 minutes.” Mary said that her biggest supports were the math coach, her leadership team, and the other teachers she worked with. She became known quickly for being a strong teacher and responsible, so she began to take on leadership roles early in her teaching career. She was the Chair of the Shared Decision-Making team, Chair of the Foundations Committee, and was the Activity Director. It was in her second year of teaching that Mary decided to get her master’s degree in Educational Leadership. She knew this was what she wanted to do. It was also at this time that her principal asked her to become a math coach for the school and sent her to a coaching academy.

Coaching Experience

After three years of teaching, Mary became a math coach at a local elementary school. She was nervous because she did not have an elementary school background, but she fit in nicely at her new school. She recalled taking everything she learned at the coaching academy and developing her own philosophy on coaching. She knew she needed to build relationships with the teachers and help to build buy-in from them. She said, “I found who the heavy hitters were at the school and learned from them, I was very humble, and I needed them to know that I can’t do this without you all, and I just built a team and trust.” Mary found remarkable success as a coach and the school saw their math achievement grow each year. She built a strong relationship with her principal and her principal began to let her participate in interviews for new teachers. It was

during one of these times that Mary said, “look at me, I am going to be a principal, I knew then I wanted to go into administration.” At the end of her fourth year as a coach, Mary became an assistant principal at another elementary school.

Assistant Principal Experience

Mary was an assistant principal at an elementary school in the same district that she had been a teacher and a coach. She did not go through the assistant principal preparation program prior to becoming an assistant principal. Instead, she completed the program during her first year of the assistant principalship. She shared, “during that time, I knew the role of the AP was to support the principal in every capacity.” She did not really see the role as this set list of tasks to do, just whatever the principal needed her to do. She said, “I didn’t question it. I was like, okay, you want me to do this. Okay, I’ll do that. Or I don’t know how to do that, so I will call somebody and figure it out.” Mary described many distinct roles of the AP position and felt that she had to figure out those roles on her own by asking questions and figuring things out. She remembered the assistant principal preparation program and felt that it did not prepare her for the role or help her with her assigned tasks. She recalled attending monthly assistant principal meetings with the district. She shared, “I think I knew everything already, so when I got to the assistant principal meetings, the things they discussed, I did not feel that it was beneficial or helpful to me, so I kind of dreaded going to them.” Mary felt that most of her learning during this time happened through the experiences she faced daily in the job itself. At no time did Mary feel that anyone was systematically coaching her to become a principal. She said, “my principal knew my aspirations, and what I do believe she did for me, was she gave me opportunities to experience administrative duties.” Mary’s principal moved to another school towards the end of

year four of her assistant principalship and the school was one year away from closing. The district decided to allow Mary to remain at the school by herself with a mentor principal nearby to assist when needed. This gave her the experience of running a school before she took on the principalship role.

Personal Characteristics

Mary described herself as an introverted child who did not make friends easily. As she became older and played sports, she began to make some friends. On several occasions, Mary described herself as “not the smartest,” but also shared how she recognized this early on and always worked harder because of it. In elementary school she said, “I always was interested in school. I wasn’t the smartest kid, but I did work hard.” In high school she shared, “I didn’t have a good GPA in high school, I wasn’t the smartest, but I knew I wanted to go to college.” And during her time as a coach she said, “I just felt like they (teachers) knew more than me anyway, because most of them went to school for education and I did not. And I always knew I wasn’t the smartest person, so because of that, I always wanted to present myself very well.”

Track for Principalship

Mary attended the district’s Rising Leaders program during her third year as an assistant principal. While she enjoyed meeting and collaborating with other assistant principals, she did not feel that the program was beneficial to the everyday tasks of a principal. Mary said, “I have so much experience already that when I got there, I’m like, what is this?” She did appreciate learning about having a global perspective and practicing more of the hard conversations. She had already had experience with hard conversations, but she shared, “there were several people who had not had that experience from the assistant principal role because they were either doing

transportation or textbooks.” Mary shared that she had experience with hard conversations through her coaching work, by reading books by Marzano about coaching and feedback, and watching videos. Mary completed the Rising Leaders program and then passed her screening. She became a principal two years later.

Principal Selection

Mary became the principal of her school through a principal forum process. Assistant principals go through an extensive process to become eligible to participate in a principal forum. First, the Region Superintendent must provide a recommendation. Then they receive an invitation for an instructional walk with another district leader. If they pass this instructional walk, they interview with the entire Division of Schools team. If they pass this interview, they are eligible to participate in a principal forum. The forum consists of three eligible assistant principals chosen by the region superintendent of the school with an opening. Parents, faculty, and business partners then receive a Qualtrics link to send in questions for the forum. The forum is in the evening and are either in person or virtual. Usually two sessions occur, one with the faculty and staff and one with parents and business partners. A moderator asks the submitted questions, and the stakeholders can hear directly from the candidates on how they would answer the questions. The stakeholders then get an opportunity to vote for their selection of the new principal. These votes go to the superintendent of schools who then makes the final decision on who the new principal will be.

Mary appreciated the process used to select her as the new principal of her school. She appreciated having an opportunity to speak to the community. The types of questions asked help her to have a better understanding of what the stakeholders were looking for in their new

principal. She shared, “they have a chance to get to know you and give feedback on whether you are a right fit for that particular school.”

Emotions

Becoming a principal was something that Mary wanted very much. She described her first feelings as extreme excitement, but with many different thoughts running through her mind. She was surprised to find that district leadership had some concerns initially because they had heard that she did not respond well to feedback in the past. This led her to worry initially. She said, “but that’s not who I am, I do have a strong personality, and I don’t apologize for that, but I want to show you that is not me.” So, her next feeling was that of needing to prove herself. She was also surprised to hear about the conditions at her new school. The culture and climate were in “disarray” and the climate survey spoke to that. She was still excited and thought about how she would get this team to come together. Mary did not feel pressure with the school grade. She knew it was her responsibility to increase the school grade. She said, “I believe in school grades. I believe you should know where you stand. I believe that it helps you get better, and if you look at it that way, there is no pressure.” She shared that she loves challenges and good competition, and this helped reduce the pressure for her.

Mary did share that she had some fears going into her first principalship. She was fearful about how the staff would accept her but calmed her fears thinking about how good she was with building relationships. She was also fearful about the lack of assistant principal support. She knew she had to move the school and knew she could not do it alone. She needed to develop her assistant principal but did not see how in the brief time she worked with them. She thought,

“How do I develop a person who has been in a position for so long?” This was a concern that kept Mary up at night during her first year.

Another feeling that came up was just this “heavy weight” of responsibility. There are so many distinct roles and responsibilities of the principal that at times it is “unrealistic.” She said, “we make it happen, but at times it’s just a wash over, it’s just a glaze because it is so much.”

Roles of the Principal

Mary listed off many different roles of the principalship. She first mentioned relationships and making connections with all constituents. She also stressed the importance of being very intentional about how you develop those relationships. To do that, you must have soft skills to help you understand how to work with adults. She shared, “you have to have an understanding of different personalities and how to work around all of those different personalities.” She talked about organizational knowledge and how to develop systems to make your organization run smoothly. Mary also felt that you must be creative and not afraid to take risks as a principal.

Instructional leadership is one of the most important roles of the school principal. Mary understands the importance of knowing what good instruction looks like and how to provide feedback to support teachers in their delivery of good instruction. She talked about understanding data and how to use it to make instructional decisions.

Another role of the principal, according to Mary, is to develop the assistant principal so that they can one day run their own school. In doing this, Mary says it is important to expose them to everything that the principal does. Mary attributes her exposure to so much as an

assistant principal to her success as a principal and wants the same for her assistant principal.

She shared:

I don't want them to go anywhere and say they don't know something, and they were with me. That's a problem. That means I didn't do what I was supposed to do. I want him to feel ready and that I was able to assist in that process.

There are so many different roles of a principal. When asked if there was anything she would change about the role, Mary said that there are just too many responsibilities, especially when there is a lack of personnel. She shared how guidance counselors are no longer supposed to serve as LEA's (Local Education Agency) when reviewing special education plans with parents. When she asked who should serve in that role, the answer was that principals could serve in this role. She said:

I have to develop a team, I have to lead common planning, make sure testing is right, keep kids safe, take care of discipline, and make a plan to pivot when fifteen people don't show up to work. You want me to be LEA? Something about that does not make sense. We are literally only one person without proper personnel to delegate to. I am not a unicorn. It is a lot, it's a lot.

She feels that additional personnel would be helpful and that "some of the weight that gets put on principals could be a little bit more balanced."

A Day in the Life of a New Principal

Mary starts her mornings meeting with her leadership team so that everyone is on the same page for the day. She then does her rounds to say good morning to students and staff. She wants to make sure everyone sees her. She schedules herself to see classrooms in the morning

and then transitions to parent meetings between 10:00 and 11:00. If she does not have parent meetings, she then goes through email and any other incomplete tasks. During the middle of her day, she makes sure to be in the priority lunches where there is sometimes a shortage of supervision. Mary then spends her afternoons walking more classrooms. She always makes sure to include her CSS (Communication and Social Skills) classrooms and her resource classrooms so that everyone feels the same accountability. Next, she assists with dismissal and then leaves time after school for meeting with parents and teachers. Mary finds she can keep her schedule consistent daily because of the systems and expectations put in place. She said the schedule sometimes deviates if someone calls out at the last minute and there is no substitute. Mary did say:

I always have a pivot plan, but when those pivot plans didn't work out because more people were out than I anticipated, then I had to cover a classroom or if I had a really irate parent and I had to have a conversation with them. Those are the only times I would veer from my schedule.

Feeling Success

Mary has felt most successful in making connections, developing individuals, and having hard conversations with staff members. She feels that she is a people person and that it just comes naturally for her to make people feel at ease. She finds it easy to “understand different characters and personalities of people.” She also shared that it has not always been easy. She has been known in the past to be very blunt. She shared, “I have had to take some hard feedback from people I know love me, they have my best interest at heart, and I have learned to be more mindful of others and how I come across.” Mary has also used self-help books to learn how to

be more intentional about relationship building. She feels that building these relationships help her to gain buy-in from her staff. Once these relationships are in place, it is much easier to get buy-in to do the challenging work around instruction. Mary really enjoys the role of developing teachers in their craft. She said:

I enjoy the development piece. I love when a teacher feels comfortable coming to me and saying ‘remember we had that conversation last week. Okay, so I tried this and what do you think about this?’ It creates this bridge of collaboration and trust.

Mary also discussed how she learned to have hard conversations through her participation in a coaching academy and reading *The Art of Coaching*. Through this work she practiced having feedback sessions with teachers and feels this has helped her tremendously in her ability to provide feedback that is both positive and impactful.

When coming into her new building, Mary felt that it was important to have one-to-one conversations with staff members to help build some trust. She felt that these conversations were successful. She knew it was especially important to show the unfamiliar staff that she was listening to them in these sessions. She used these sessions to “develop an action plan for the school and incorporate some small wins right away.” Another way she built trust was in her way of providing feedback at the very beginning. She said, “I don’t start with evaluative feedback. Nothing is evaluative. It’s all soft feedback, so that when an evaluation finally does come, you don’t feel like it was a ‘got you’ situation.” One final way that Mary built trust was by being consistent. She shared, “they knew what to expect of me. Every day, I’m smiling, every day I show up, I’m excited to be here. I speak to everyone. Just being intentional about checking in with people professionally and personally.” Mary shared that she really realized that consistency

was important when she did not send a newsletter one week. She said, “I think that taught me something too, they were like you can’t not send out the newsletter, it kind of messed up their routine.”

Mary was able to feel immense success at the end of her first year by raising the school grade to a “C.” She said the best feeling was “knowing that we earned it together as a team.” She was then able to take their success, really look at what worked well and what did not work so well to make plans for the upcoming year. She also had a medical procedure done right before she had to host summer school for the first time. She received so much feedback about how smooth and well run the program was in her absence. She shared:

In our absence, that truly shows the impact, to see how it truly impacts people when you’re not there, you just have to give it all to them, and then it works as if you were there, to me that means the most.

Challenges

One of the most challenging tasks of a new principal, according to Mary, is managing and prioritizing time. She said, “the responsibilities, you are responsible for everything. Knowing what is a priority and what is not a priority is not easy.” When she does think about priorities, she said for her it is safety first and then instruction. Mary also shared that delegating was challenging for her as well. She shared:

Because of my personality, I just needed things to happen. I don’t just give a task without explaining it first and then I have to follow-up, I didn’t have time for that, so I have learned to have time because I’m only one person.

Another challenge during her first year was having an assistant principal on whom she could not depend. She had one for the first two and half months of the school year and then that person left. The next one she hired was only there for three months and then left for to lead her own school. Mary said, “it was a lot and it felt like everything fell on me. I had a team but didn’t want to burn them out, so I put more things on my plate.”

Vacancies and lack of substitutes were also a big challenge during the first year of principalship for Mary. She said, “I knew we were going to have issues with substitutes and that was why I needed to cultivate a team who knew the purpose behind my pivot plans, so they would have a heads up.” There were also some challenges with developing a team that she did not hire. Some of the team had been at the school for a long time and had become complacent. Adding new members who Mary was able to hire has helped with this challenge. She shared that the importance is in the hiring process. She was hiring for high will. She shared, “if you have the will to do it, I can help you through the process.” She said it is a lot easier when you can build the team. She stated, “I think it makes a big difference when I buy into you and you buy into me, and then you will buy into the work we do together.”

In the current school year, there are new benchmarks, new curriculum, and new state assessments. With everything being new, it is challenging for Mary to make sure they are prepared for everything and that they keep in mind how the teachers will be feeling about all the changes. She said:

I had to pad the impact of what they were going to be feeling. Teachers are leaving the profession; how do I make them want to be here? That is a real concern. How do I know if the new curriculum is going to get us where we need to be? How do we use it? How do

I know if it's going to work? How do I keep teacher's momentum going in the right direction with the newness? These are my biggest concerns.

Although there is excitement over the start of a new year and a positivity about having a new team in place, it also brings about some challenges. Mary has a lot of new team members this year, including a new assistant principal, a new counselor, a new CSS site coach, and new teachers. Mary stated her goal is “crafting a development plan that really supports the team and truly reflecting and refining that plan to keep a pulse on the development, making sure they all feel supported, that it's not just a feeling, but it's true support.” She says she wants to support them while still holding them accountable for the work. She shared that she is staying later this year because of the new team and wanting to make sure she is following up on everything. She said for her the goal is “supporting the team, especially the ones who are new to their role, new to their grade levels, and not missing those moments and still making everyone feel valued and appreciated while still moving the academic achievement forward.” All this with still being new to her role as well. She said:

I can't even focus on my noviceness because I have a team that is so novice, but I think through their novice experiences and my willingness, and I feel like I am on top of it as much as I can be, it is helping to shape my principalship experience too.

Work-life Balance

When it comes to work-life balance, Mary feels that she perfected this as an assistant principal. She recognizes that she must balance the two and so she does not bring work home with her. She has learned to maximize the time she has at school. She gives herself some late days to get things done, but also ensures she has early days. She said, “When I am home, I am

home.” Her husband is also a school principal and they do not talk about work at home. She shared, “If I have to talk to somebody, I call a principal friend or my sister.” Mary also shared that keeping a schedule has really helped her with this. She said, “if it doesn’t get scheduled, it doesn’t get done.” She knows it will take her more time at work during evaluation season to give valuable feedback, so she schedules late days during this time.

Feedback

Mary says she does get some feedback regarding her work as a new principal. She says, “I think that is one of the biggest things we need is feedback.” She feels in the past that she has received informal feedback that is more fleeting and in the moment. She recognizes that everyone has a distinctive style when providing feedback, but for her she “needs to know step one, step two, step three, what does it look like? What does it sound like? And I need to be able to ask questions about the feedback you are providing me.” In talking about feedback, Mary also stated the importance of her supervisor coming to the school frequently enough to be able to give valid feedback. She said:

We need feedback, but we need feedback we can trust. In order for you to give us feedback, you got to know us, you have to spend time with us, you have to really be paying attention, and you have to want to develop us.

Principal Supports

The district that Mary works for has been supportive in providing some of the training necessary to become a successful principal. Mary feels like they communicate effectively when it comes to completion of tasks. She said that the trainings are beneficial and usually provide her with what tasks she needs to complete, but there needs to be some additional training around

how to get those tasks done. She said, “if we could just be more intentional about professional development. I believe it needs to be something that we can truly take and apply.” She also talked about the need for examples and models of what the expectations are. She wishes there were a handbook for assistant principal training and/or principal training. Mary feels like there is some disconnect between the district and what is happening in schools. Her vision for district training would be a differentiated format that meets the specific needs of new principals. She described scenario-based training where new principals or even experienced principals could work through real-world issues. She shared how these trainings could help them work through some of the challenges discussed earlier. Mary has enjoyed some district trainings meant to fuel principals, such as motivational speakers.

Another support that Mary would like to see in place is the ability to visit other schools. She said, “don’t take me to any old school. Take me where it is a highly effective school where the principal is yielding results consistently. I want to see a model with information provided on how they do it.”

Another support that Mary has is with her Region Superintendent and Executive Director who supervise her school. She says, “it is helpful to have someone that I feel like I can bounce ideas off of as a new principal.” She feels this person is the one that should be most knowledgeable about your school so that they can bridge the disconnect between the district and school. She shared, “if there are needs at the school, the region leadership needs to be knowledgeable about it, and then they need to be responsible for communicating that to the higher ups.” Mary feels safe calling her regional supervisors when she has questions. She utilizes

them to proofread her emails sometimes because she knows she can be too direct. They have been helpful in aiding her in this way.

Mary talked about the importance of principal mentorship. She said she started the year in a mentorship program, but then it just “flatlined.” She shared:

I really think that is a missing component, especially for principals, with the work that we have to do, because if you’ve already done it and you’ve been successful, then you can really help me. I think that’s what we could use to assist us with those areas of responsibility.

She says a mentor should be a dedicated, highly motivated principal who has the desire to coach and be a mentor. They must have the “heart for developing the person in the seat.

Although she does not have a mentor, she has developed relationships with other principals in the district and will lean on them when working through problems or asking questions.

Looking Towards the Future

For the future, Mary sees herself at the same school with the same team with which she is currently working. She said:

I like to see the work. I want to see people over time and to say that, yeah, it is running like a well-oiled machine. The people know the expectations. I want to see it where I am no longer this head leader, but everybody is leading.

She said that if she is highly effective then the people that work around her should look like “mini principals of their units.” She has a vision that her school will be a true “A” school in three years. She sees a school that does not necessarily need reading and math coaches because

the teachers can do that work for themselves because she has developed them into teacher leaders. She said, “in three years, I want to be able to capitalize on the investments that have been made over time.” Once she brings her current school to this point, she also aspires to lead a middle school.

Reflections on Being a New Principal

Mary is entering her second year as a principal. She does not feel like the second year is easier because there is a new set of challenges this year. She thought it might be easier because she now has a new assistant principal, but the assistant principal still needs development and that takes time. In reflecting over her first year, Mary feels that she is learning more about the type of leader she is. She is finding what works for her and what she needs to refine. Mary is excited for this new school year because she has a new assistant principal and new team members. In thinking about how the first year went without an assistant principal, she is already planning on how to best utilize them and train them at the same time. She feels that communication is most important. She plans to have them support her with safety, discipline, and textbooks. Mary has learned the importance of laying out roles and responsibilities for each of her employees to set expectations for everyone. She shared, “communicating the roles and responsibilities and just monitoring that process effectively will help with the role of me delegating appropriately.”

These roles and responsibilities are equally important to the front office staff as they are the ones who take in a lot of the day’s problems and concerns. Mary feels that having clear communication with the front office staff allows her to not have too many interruptions to her day. She says, “they need to know my schedule and what happens when I am in classrooms. They have to know I only meet with parents if it is planned unless they are going to the news.”

She has genuinely enjoyed her first-year experience in the principal role. She is incredibly happy to be at the school she is at and feels very supported by district leadership and the district. She shared:

I'm doing the work I want to do. This is a passion for me, like the whole developing piece, although it is a challenge, I get to develop people. I feel like that is what I was sent here to do in life. And that's it. I love what I do.

Mary's Structural Description

This section will present a structural description of Mary's personal and professional experiences that have influenced her role as principal. The structural description gives deeper meaning and interpretation to Mary's words. The structural description has been broken down into the following themes: (1) interpersonal qualities, (2) the art of coaching, (3) full exposure during assistant principal experience, (4) weight of the principalship, (5) time management skills, (6) going it alone versus developing a team, (7) principal support, and (8) feedback and reflection.

Intrapersonal Qualities

Mary has several intrapersonal qualities that have influenced her work as a school principal. First, Mary is a noticeably confident individual. This confidence is sometimes because she is very skilled areas, and other times it is a forced confidence when it comes to certain areas that she is not skilled at. She developed this confidence through her training and experience with Toastmasters International. Toastmasters International is a nonprofit organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills. These skills came in very handy as a classroom teacher and coach. Mary shared, "So I think I know everything, but I know I don't know everything, so I'm

confident.” This confidence helps others see her as someone who is dependable and supportive. She knew that she was ready to be a principal after just a few years of being an assistant principal. She was confident going into the interview process.

Mary also possesses perseverance, especially when it comes to goal setting and meeting those goals. As a child, Mary had many hardships to work through. She was the oldest of seven children and had to take on many responsibilities at home. There was a period of separation from her mother and some of her siblings during her childhood. Despite these hardships, Mary was able to excel in school. Mary talked about participating in many different sports as a child. When it came to the swimming team, she shared that she was not a good swimmer, but she never gave up and just kept trying to be good at it. She shared that she liked setting goals for herself and then never stops until she meets those goals. As a math coach, Mary met every goal she set for her math team and exceeded those goals. She then went on to become an assistant principal at a different school and set those same goals. She set out to increase the math scores at her new school, and she met those goals as well.

Another intrapersonal quality that Mary has is self-discipline when it comes to becoming the best at what she does. In multiple times throughout the interview, Mary would say she was not the smartest-person and that she overcomes that by being the hardest working. During her early years of playing sports, Mary always strived to be the best at each sport. She shared that she worked hard to be the best. Just after two years of teaching, Mary was taking on many different leadership roles at her school and her principal approached her to start attending a coaching academy so that she could become a math coach. Once she became an official math coach she went on an interview with an elementary school. She was nervous and wanted to make

a great impression, so she created an extensive PowerPoint that laid out all her goals and vision for being the best coach she could be. Mary's goals as a coach were to have the best math team possible and to receive increased state scores each year. Mary worked hard to meet those goals each year. Mary realized that if she was going to be the best as an assistant principal and principal, she was going to have to be comfortable with asking questions.

Passion and love for competition are what drive Mary in her work and life. When she was passionate about sports, she excelled in sports. During college she found she was not passionate about engineering, which was part of her major. She decided to not pursue it once she lost the passion for it and was no longer excited about it. Instead, she used her degree in mathematics to start a career in teaching. Mary found her passion in education through being a teacher, coach, assistant principal, and now principal. She uses her competitiveness to help work through the state testing pressure on schools. She said it does not stress her out because she sees it as a competition and a challenge. This attitude helped her move her school to a "C" her very first year. At the end of the day, Mary says that the principalship is a passion for her. She is doing the work that she wants to be doing in life.

The Art of Coaching

Mary attended a coaching academy in the same district that she is now principal. It is during this coaching academy that Mary learned many skills she uses as a principal. During the academy, Mary developed her philosophy of coaching. She knew that building relationships with teachers was fundamental to being a successful coach, so she worked hard to do this in her first coaching position. She learned to identify the "heavy hitters" in the building and found ways to learn from them. She was highly successful at building a team and creating trust within the team.

Mary was successful in her first year as a math coach with her team seeing great growth on state testing. When Mary transitioned into the role of assistant principal, she used her coaching lens to provide effective feedback to teachers.

Another thing she learned as a coach that has helped her in the principalship is the idea of building buy-in. She learned that if she wanted teachers to do what she was asking, she had to build buy-in and to get buy-in, she had to develop trusting relationships with the teachers. She did this by connecting with teachers on personal matters, using her gift to make people laugh, and really listening to those teachers who shared their best practice. She also was careful in sharing all of the information from her teachers with the principal. Teachers needed to see they could trust her with the information shared privately. She also learned a little about equity and how equity meant some teachers needed more of her time than others, some teachers needed public accolades while others did not, and she needed to accommodate for that.

Full Exposure During Assistant Principal Experience

Mary feels like she is successful as a school principal because of the full exposure to the work as an assistant principal. She had additional exposure when she was a coach as well. As a coach, her principal would allow her to participate in interviewing teachers. Mary learned about the important questions to ask and how to identify a strong fit for her school through this exposure. Mary worked under two principals during her time as an assistant principal. In both situations, she had the opportunity to experience many different roles and responsibilities that helped her be prepared for the principalship. She had experiences with scheduling, testing, grant writing, leading common planning sessions, preparing professional development for teachers, providing feedback to teachers, having hard conversations, discipline, and a plethora of other

experiences. Mary knew that she was having a dissimilar experience than her peers because the assistant principals would talk at their meetings. She said her peers shared that they mostly oversaw discipline and testing only.

Mary had a unique experience during her fifth year of being an assistant principal. Her principal moved to a larger school in the county and her school was slated to be closing the following year. The district allowed Mary to run the school as an assistant principal with no principal on site. She collaborated with an expert principal who checked in on her throughout the year. This experience allowed her to really feel what it was like to make most of the decisions for a school and to be responsible for all school operations. Mary had full exposure to almost all roles and responsibilities of the principalship before she actually held the title and this benefited her during her first year.

Weight of the Principalship

Mary acknowledges that the principal role holds a lot of responsibilities. She has not allowed this large responsibility to impact her overall wellness or family life. She does think that the district should analyze the roles and responsibilities of the principalship to see if changes could lighten the load. Some of the roles and responsibilities that could be analyzed are school safety, participation in multi-disciplinary team meetings, discipline, and curriculum. Many of the secondary schools have additional staff who cover those roles and responsibilities. Mary shared how it is in her nature to get everything done no matter what, but the district is asking a lot of principals. She feels like the expectations are not realistic and said, “I am not a unicorn.”

Another repeated phrase throughout the interviews was “It is a lot.”

Time Management Skills

Mary developed some of her time management skills as a classroom teacher. As an assistant principal she also had an opportunity to work on time management. Mary learned as an AP that she wanted to separate work and home. To do this, she had to find a way to accomplish her work tasks while she was at work and not bring it home. She did this by staying late a few nights a week and capitalizing on Saturday school. Whenever she had Saturday school, she would accomplish more of her tasks. As a principal, Mary does find it difficult to manage her time. She follows some of the same routines she did as an AP, but there are just so many more tasks, responsibilities, and interruptions as a school principal. She has found that creating a daily schedule is helpful in trying to get things accomplished at work during the workday.

Mary says that it is not just about time management, but it is also about prioritizing the tasks. There are so many different things coming at a principal, it is hard to know what to prioritize and what can wait. She felt that no one ever really talks about that, and there is not a manual that provides that information. So sometimes, time might be spent on something that takes a really long time, but could have been something delegated out or done at a later time. She feels like she must guess at where to focus her time. Mary has personally developed a system of safety first and then instruction when deciding on her priorities.

Going It Alone Versus Developing a Team

Mary learned early in her teaching career about the importance of having a strong, supportive team. During her first few years of teaching, she had a strong leadership team she worked with, a strong math coach who supported her in many ways, and supportive colleagues who brainstormed with her frequently. Mary also developed high-impact teams as a math coach.

She saw by building trusting relationships, gaining buy-in from teachers, and setting achievable goals that high student achievement was possible.

Going in as a new principal, Mary knew the importance of a dedicated team, however she has some difficulties because she inherited a team that was already in place and who had some challenges. Her assistant principal was not strong, and Mary felt like she could not delegate tasks out to her. This assistant principal was only with her for a few months and then another one came in but was only there for another few months. Mary really felt like she was alone during her first year and that everything fell on her. As some teachers transitioned out of the building after the first year, Mary was able to utilize her interviewing skills to hire new teachers into her building. In doing this, Mary was able to hire individuals who were looking to make an impact working with her vision and mission for the school.

In this new year, Mary was able to select and hire a new assistant principal. With lessons learned during the first year, Mary understands the importance of developing a strong team to help support her in the work. She will have strong, clear communication about the roles and responsibilities, and she will delegate tasks to the AP. Some of the tasks she is going to delegate are textbooks, discipline, and some of the classroom observations. She is going to work this year on creating a system to help evaluate the growth of her team. She wants to be able to track it, document it, and follow-up so that by the end of the year, they are a high-performing team. She understands the key is supporting the team in reaching their goals and wants to ensure she is supporting them effectively.

Principal Support

Mary feels supported by the district and district leadership. She does feel that the district could do better about timelines given to principals. She says they receive many things with a quick turnaround time that pulls them away from doing some of the more important work. She believes the cause is a disconnect between the district and what is happening in the schools. If there are certain things that happen every year, these things should be laid out on a calendar at the beginning of the school year so that principals can plan for them. The school improvement plan timeline is one example that Mary gave. She shared that it is something they have to do every year and would do better if the timeline was laid out ahead of time. She also feels that the district could do better with principal professional development. Most of the professional development sessions are sit and get type sessions that tell you what to do, but not how to do them. Mary would like to see some job-embedded professional development and some scenario-based sessions where principals can problem solve. She would like sessions on how to develop people, how to make people feel connected to the work, and deeper sessions on ethics and professional responsibilities. As challenging as the job of principal is, Mary really enjoys motivational speakers that come to the district. She shared how this helps reconnect her to her why and would like to see more opportunities for that type of development as well.

Mary says that she sees her district leadership on a weekly basis and that she feels comfortable talking to them about any issues or concerns that she has. She does feel that they provide a safe space for her to share. Her district leadership has provided her with feedback on specific things happening in her building and she appreciates that they know what is happening in her building enough to provide that feedback. One example of this for Mary was regarding an incident that occurred in the main office. A parent complained that she received poor customer

service in the main office. While working with her district leadership, she received feedback on how she could adjust things in the front office so that there was at least one person there to be the face of the school. She heeded the advice, made the adjustments, and feels that the front office is now much more friendly, even when it is very busy.

Principal mentorship is something that has not been strong for Mary. She participated in a new principal mentor program during the summer prior to the school year started. She loved the experience of learning from seasoned principals and receiving valuable resources from them. The seasoned principals shared how they open their school year, gave the new principals templates of some of the forms they used, and advice on getting to know their new faculties. Unfortunately, the program did not continue due to the facilitator receiving a promotion. Mary says she would benefit from collaborating with a mentor principal who really has a heart for mentoring others.

Feedback and Reflection

Mary enjoys receiving feedback and reflecting on her practice. She described our interview sessions as therapeutic and appreciated the opportunity to think through and reflect on her first year and a half of the principalship. She shared how she feels like she was successful the first year and feels good about going into year two. She does not feel like the year has started off easier than her first year because she is facing a new set of challenges this year. The difference is now she knows what to expect for the most part and can focus on these new challenges.

Some early pieces of feedback she received that has helped her was on her approach to communicating with people. Someone shared with her that she can be a little too blunt with her speech and written communication. Mary took this feedback to heart and used some self-help

books and videos to get better about the way she communicates. This change has allowed her to build better and stronger relationships with her staff and has helped her to gain buy-in from teachers. She has become more intentional with relationship building and is more sensitive to what others might be experiencing.

As a principal Mary feels that feedback is vital to her development. She has received some feedback in the past that was intimidating and threatening. The feedback that was given to her was more of “just do it because I said so” or feedback based on something that was relayed to the supervisor from someone else. Mary felt like it was very unintentional feedback that did not help her become better at the job of principal. This is not the type of feedback that motivates her. This year she has appreciated the positive feedback from her district leadership that has helped her identify areas for change. She appreciates feedback that identifies the issue and then provides steps to improving. Mary mentioned appreciating a current supervisor who used the evaluation rubric to provide her with specific feedback with examples. She was not surprised by the feedback because she had been having conversations all along with her supervisor and so she felt like it was more of a collaboration than a “gotcha”. She also said that she needs feedback that she can trust from people who are truly trying to grow her as a principal. These would be people who come out to her building often and know the work she is doing and talk about the work she is doing.

Jennifer’s Textural Description

This section will present a textural description of Jennifer’s personal and professional experiences that have influenced her role as principal. The textural description is given using Jennifer’s words with no interpretation. The experiences have been broken down into the

following categories: (1) growing up, (2) personal school experiences, (3) teaching experience, (4) assistant principal experience, (5) personal characteristics, (6) track for principalship, (7) principal selection, (8) roles of principalship, (9) a day in the life of a new principal, (10) feeling success, (11) challenges, (12) work-life balance, (13) feedback, (14) principal supports, (15) looking towards the future, and (16) reflections on being a new principal.

Growing Up

Jennifer grew up in a large urban city. She considers herself a transient student who moved around a lot. She described herself as “cycling through schools” in the same city in elementary school and having to “abruptly go live with my grandmother.” Jennifer shared that she experienced domestic violence in her home as a child.

Personal School Experiences

Jennifer described herself as introverted as a child and said she was very studious. Although she transitioned in and out of schools, she was still able to do well. She said:

The principal and teachers were just in awe at how I had these things going on outside of school, but I still came to school and did what I was supposed to do. I was still a star student; you know regardless of some of the things that were going on with me outside of school.

Jennifer shared that she really enjoyed school and it came quite easy for her during her K-12 years. She remembered two teachers who really stood out to her. One was her art teacher who found something in her that she did not even know she had. Jennifer learned that she was good at drawing. She shared, “that was that moment that we always talk about, where teachers see something in students that they don’t know, and a teacher’s job is to bring that out, and that

particular teacher brought out that one skill for me.” Another teacher that Jennifer remembered was her math teacher. She shared, “I was in, I guess, standard classes, and my math teacher, he thought maybe I should have been in the advanced class.” She remembered him advocating for her and moving her into the advanced class. She shared:

Had he not advocated for me to be placed in those classes, then I just would have gone on my regular track not being exposed to more rigorous content that will push my limits or just open my eyes that I’m a lot smarter than I think I am.

Jennifer always knew she wanted to go to college. She said:

My family didn’t have the funds to send me to college, and I knew that if I got in the top 20%, I could get Bright Futures, so I convinced my grandmother to let me go to a different school, because I know I couldn’t be in the top 20% at my current school, so I convinced my grandma, if you let me go to this school, I can go to college. So I went, I got in the top 20%, and that was important to me, because that was my gateway to college.

She ended up going to a Florida school and first majored in architecture based on her drawing skills. After two years in the architecture program, Jennifer began to realize she really loved to “draw and create art,” but the rest of the program was no longer exciting to her. She was having some challenges at home with needing to take care of her brother, so she ended up switching programs to education to try to finish earlier. She shared, “my plan of coming home to take care of my brother didn’t quite work out that way I thought it would because I became a parent, so I graduated with a newborn.”

Teaching Experience

Jennifer returned to her hometown after college and found a teacher position while attending a recruitment fair. She recalled being extremely nervous on her first day with students, but it got easier over time. She was lucky to have collaborated with phenomenal coaches who taught her best practices for teaching. Some of the things she remembered learning those first few years were the “importance of anchor charts, the importance of analyzing student work or identifying misconceptions, the importance of breaking standards down, looking at the item specs, the importance of creating instructional calendars, and the importance of FCIM (Florida Continuous Improvement Model).” Jennifer spent five years at her first school and then wanted a change so that she could continue to grow as an educator. She transferred to one of the elementary schools in the district monitored by the state. She stated, “I gave myself a personal challenge. I wanted to know if I could get the same results if I put myself in a more challenging setting.” This situation allowed Jennifer to grow as a teacher as she found that the things that worked at her first school, did not work at the new school. By collaborating with more successful teachers in her new school, she learned how to be a better teacher. Jennifer shared:

I validated myself as a teacher because my student data was consistent, so I was one of those teachers who met the bonus for three consecutive years with my average being higher than the district’s data, so I am like, yes, I’m validated.

At this new school, Jennifer remembered not having any coaches to help support the teachers, so the teachers were depended upon to become the experts. She was able to take on a coaching hat as she helped to support her colleagues. Also, during this time, Jennifer served as the PDF (Professional Development Facilitator). In this role, she was able to help support new teachers in the building. She shared, “I would have meetings around whatever areas they needed

professional development in, so whether it was establishing rituals and routines, having conversations about CHAMPS, looking at data, or anything else they needed.” During this time, she felt that she was serving as a coach to the new teachers and collaborated alongside the principal to help with focus observations of the new teachers. One final leadership role that Jennifer took on was that of the Lead Teacher in the after-school program. This gave her the opportunity to manage a group of teachers. She described the role as, “making sure the progress reports were always updated, making sure lesson plans were in place, observing classrooms, and making sure they were doing what they were supposed to be doing.”

Jennifer began thinking about getting her master’s degree in Educational Leadership. She said, “I knew I wanted to go on an educational leadership track, and I knew that in order for me to get where I ultimately wanted to be, I had to have my master’s degree.” She felt that it was time to take this next step. She shared, “I felt like I had done everything that I could within a classroom to make a difference, and the shift to go into leadership was about me making a difference on a greater scale.”

Assistant Principal Experience

Jennifer did a two-year program at a local university to get her master’s degree. She described a new program design where the local school district and the university partnered together. The purpose of the collaboration was for the local school district employees to have their own separate classes. Unfortunately, only four students from the district applied and so it did not go as planned. She was still able to graduate with her master’s degree and her district preparation program completed, but she felt like there was a lack of follow-through on the original program. The parts she appreciated the most were the two summer practicums. She

shared, “I think the practicums embedded throughout the program was definitely a plus, because it was like you got the opportunity to put these skills to work or to see everything that goes into preparing for the school year.”

Jennifer’s first assistant principal position was in the same school that she began teaching in. She described it as a big “learning curve” because she was coming straight out of the classroom. Reflecting on her experience she did say, “I absolutely think it would be beneficial if administrators had some work serving as a coach prior to the assistant principal role.” She said that there were a lot of things that happened outside of the classroom that she did not know about when she went right into the assistant principal role and maybe she would have experienced some of those things if she had been a coach. Some of the tasks that she felt she was not prepared for included testing coordinator, school operations, making sure coverage is available and schedules. She said, “One thing I did know going into leadership, I knew what good instruction looked like, what good instruction sounded like, and with that I was still able to support teachers in improving their practices.”

Jennifer worked as an assistant principal in the same school for five years. She described having a different focus for each of the years. She said, “my first year as an assistant principal, I was a sponge, just trying to master the logistics of the school, supporting the vision of the principal, and getting testing under control.” She shared that after the first year, she was able to then start focusing on being an instructional leader by participating in observations and providing feedback to teachers. By year three, she was collaborating with the coaches and taking a more active role in planning the instruction in each subject area. And by years four and five she was focusing on building culture and climate. With all these tasks, Jennifer credits her principal as

the biggest support for her. Whenever she would have questions, she was comfortable going to her principal. Unfortunately, Jennifer did not feel that her master's degree prepared her enough to become an assistant principal. She shared that she would have liked to see more topics that were specific to the county she would be working for. Some of the things she wished she had more experience with are discipline and following the code of conduct, building culture and climate, securing stakeholders input, and the rules around safety.

One of the biggest challenges of being an administrator for Jennifer has been balancing her time. She shared:

With all the roles that you have to do at the elementary level, the assistant principal ultimately becomes the disciplinarian, so trying to balance the time between staying in the classroom and managing discipline. And even when you are staying in the classroom, you still have to have a designated time to make sure you're always aware of what it is that teachers are teaching, making sure you have a pulse on the different datasets, attendance, progress monitoring, blended learning, it is a lot. It is a lot.

Jennifer did not feel like she was being prepared or trained to be a principal while in the assistant principal role. She said, "I had a type of principal who was very hands-on, almost so much hands-on that you have to seek out those opportunities to take on some responsibility. I had to be very proactive in taking on additional responsibilities." She did have the opportunity to feel like a principal when allowed to run the summer school program at the end of her fifth year as assistant principal. Jennifer received a lot of positive feedback from her principal on how well she ran the program, and it made her feel more confident to go into the principal role. In thinking back on this time, she wishes she had more opportunities sooner. She said, "So I think

delegating certain tasks or just different opportunities to spearhead different things would just give me more experience throughout the course of time instead of just this big culminating piece at the end.” Regarding district AP meetings, Jennifer said they were helpful, but not always practical to the job.

Personal Characteristics

Jennifer describes herself as an introvert. She said,

In education, I feel like I am acting sometimes. I feel like a lot of time I am acting, and people are like, you don’t seem like an introvert. I am like, you just don’t know. This has brought me a lot of anxiety, but here I am, so I have forced myself to step outside my comfort zone and to push beyond those anxiety levels for me.

She is goal oriented and works diligently to meet those goals. She described when she got her scholarship in high school and how she had a desire to become an executive director in the future. Jennifer also talked about pursuing things that she is passionate about and how that helps her accel at those things. She shared, “what I’ve learned about myself is when I am passionate about something that I enjoy, then I just naturally shine in that area.”

Track for Principalship

Jennifer knew that her end goal was to become an executive director in the district, and to reach that goal, she would need to become a principal. She applied to the Aspiring Leaders program and attended the program to work on her level two certification. She recalled ending the program and not passing her principal screening. She said,

I flopped, I realized I was not ready yet after my first screening, but by the time I came around to my second screening, I just go to a point where if I don’t get picked up, I’m not

going to be disappointed. It is like I reached a point where it was like, I'm okay with the knowledge and the skills I had. So, I was much more confident the second time.

She felt that the Aspiring Leaders program was beneficial, but again, not practical. She remembered learning about the importance of having a global view and knowing what other countries were doing with education, but that is all she remembered. After passing her screening, Jennifer became the principal at the same school she started as a teacher and as an assistant principal.

Principal Selection

Jennifer participated in the same type of principal forum as Mary. She was one of three assistant principals selected to be a part of the community and staff forum to select the new principal of her school. She had a great advantage because she was the sitting assistant principal for the same school. Teachers and community members already had an idea of the type of leader she was. Jennifer was very intimidated by the forum process at first. She shared that it was challenging because “the staff already had a preconceived notion of who I was as a leader, but that preconceived notion was me as an assistant principal, not me as a principal.” So, there was some disconnect, but overall, she appreciated the process used for principal selection.

Roles of the Principal

Jennifer listed many different roles of the principal. First, “is having a good understanding of good instruction.” Understanding good instruction includes “being aware of what teachers should be teaching and students should be learning at all times across all content areas.” Included in this are frequent classroom walkthroughs, giving teachers feedback, progress

monitoring student data, having conversations with students, common planning with teachers, and adjusting where needed.

Jennifer talked about time as being one of the challenges of common planning. She shared that it was difficult to accomplish anything in the typical 45-minute period. She works around this challenge by providing additional release time to “engage in the work and dive deeper into the lesson planning process.” Jennifer also likes to use this time to allow teachers to visit each other’s classrooms to learn from one another. She said, “teachers really voice the need to go into each other’s classrooms to see best practices, they were open to people coming and modeling things in their classroom.”

Another key role described by Jennifer was collaborating with the leadership team. Although she recognizes this as a key role, she also found it difficult to do on a consistent basis. She said:

Designating dedicated time on a weekly basis to meet with the leadership team, conduct walk-throughs with the leadership team so that we are all looking at the same things and then we could possibly identify a problem of practice within the school, and then coming together to let them lead and brainstorm, like how do we address this problem of practice and how do we get teachers to buy-in to this process?

This is a vital role of the principal but challenging to do in the first year according to Jennifer.

Delegating tasks to others is another role of the principal. It really does take a team to get everything done. Jennifer shared:

In trusting the people around you to do their part as a new principal, it was overwhelming, the different parts that come along with being a principal and just wanting to have a gauge on every single thing, it's almost impossible.

She stressed how much she has learned about the importance of delegation and follow up with to ensure proper task completion.

Communication with parents and all stakeholders is another significant role of the principal. Jennifer talked about how she must ensure that she keeps all stakeholders abreast of how things are going at the school through School Advisory Committee meetings. She said:

I have to tell them the progress we are making, or if we are regressing, what are the causes or reasons for the regression, and then what are some of the things that we're doing to get the school back on track.

With communication, Jennifer talked about the importance of being open to others' ideas and suggestions. She said, "because other people see things from another perspective that I don't always see, so I constantly seek feedback from others and get others' opinions about different things before making decisions." Jennifer reiterated that communication is key and that principals must set clear expectations for everyone and "hold everyone accountable to those expectations."

Another key role of the principal is to ensure that systems are in place for the school to run smoothly. Some of the systems described by Jennifer were arrival procedures, dismissal procedures, lunch schedules, class schedules, common planning session designs, and faculty meeting times and agendas. Because Jennifer had been the assistant principal at the same school, she became principal at, some of these systems were already in place. However, she shared,

“even though I was the assistant principal and then became principal, the systems in place and the way the school operated wasn’t necessarily my vision.” She needed to make some changes so that it was more suited to her vision of the school and how it should run.

The final role that Jennifer spoke about was that of giving emotional support to teachers and staff. She shared that this is an area on which she is working. When talking about emotional support, Jennifer is talking about really listening to the problems the teachers are facing whether they are related to school or home, instead of just jumping right into why something is not being done. She tends to be very black and white and focuses on the immediate task at hand. She said, “I need to work on offering that emotional support to teachers. I need to understand that some have strong opinions and are passionate about their views.” She is recognizing that to get the job done, she needs to get the buy-in of the teachers, which requires some work with emotional support.

A Day in the Life of a New Principal

The first thing Jennifer does in the morning is see how many absences she has and how many unfilled substitute positions she has. Once she has this information, she must “divide and conquer” by assigning other staff members to cover classes. She then visits the classrooms and checks in on some of her chronic absent students to see if they came in. If they are not there, she makes some phone calls to parents to see where the students are. Jennifer then goes back out to visit classrooms to watch instruction. There are some days where she must oversee discipline throughout the day. If it is a common planning day, she ensures that she is present for all the sessions. At some point during the day, she checks on some data points, meets with her coaches about supporting various teachers and planning professional development. She tries to address

any parent complaints by the end of the day as well and then she assists with dismissal. After the students are gone from school, she checks and answers her emails.

Feeling Success

Jennifer was able to find success in her first year by diving right into the work with teachers. She felt extremely comfortable with instructional leadership. She said:

I'm still a teacher at heart, so diving into the work about what the standards are and what the teachers should be doing, being in a classroom and rolling out the lessons, looking at the data, that part just comes so naturally and easy for me.

Jennifer realizes the importance of common planning and making sure she has a dedicated time for it in her schedules. She recognized that the "time had to be protected at all costs." She felt like she was able to keep the focus on instruction all year and that was highly successful. When asked of her biggest success of the first year, Jennifer said, "We did it! We survived! Just seeing the students make progress, that's what it is all about."

Challenges

One challenge that Jennifer faced was becoming the principal at the same school she was assistant principal. She said:

Sometimes it is a gift and a curse being at the same school because you still have this expectation of the way things used to be and because you were there, it is like the teachers still hold you to that old way, but that may not have been my vision.

It was difficult for her at first to have them see her as the principal and not the assistant principal. She had to help them understand that she would do her best to "withhold some of those things, but there are opportunities for us to grow, and that's what I want to put forward."

Time management is another challenge that Jennifer described. She shared:

It takes so much time to look at multiple pieces of the data across the entire school, maintaining attendance, having students get staffed appropriately, Response to Intervention support, support for teachers, whether it is professional development or emotional support, those things were challenging for me because I got so tunnel visioned with instruction. I kind of missed some opportunities to acknowledge teachers when they were doing good things.

There are so many things that come at a new principal, that it is difficult to prioritize things. Jennifer also talked about the unrealistic timelines given to them as principals by the district. She said, “the idea of things not being due yesterday makes a big difference. The turnaround time is not always reasonable and adds undo stress.” She understands that she should delegate some of these tasks, but she said, “I don’t always get the results that I want.” She had tried to do some delegating over the summer while she went away on vacation but found tasks incomplete when she returned. She said, “It was half complete, so it was like I had to go and fix it and I should have just done it myself. That causes extra stress on you as a principal,”

Another challenge that surfaced was keeping teachers motivated and wanting to continue to do the job. Jennifer shared, “I try my very best to soften some of the stresses of teachers, but it was like they were still just stressed, stretched, and overwhelmed all year long.” She also spoke about a change in the mindset of new teachers. She is finding that teachers do not want to do any more than just teach. They are no longer willing to go above and beyond to do the important work outside of just teaching the class. She shared, “That’s what keeps me up at night, teachers just no longer willing to make the sacrifices to do what’s best for students, like if I can’t get it

done within this amount of time, then it's not getting done." Jennifer works in a challenging school and shares that there are "not a lot of people who want to work here." She has been trying to fill vacancies for the last few months and has found it incredibly challenging. She said:

It really puts things in perspective when we go to recruitment fairs and you see other schools with lines of people lining up to interview with them, and then there are some schools who just sit there looking at each other and nobody wants to come and work in our schools.

Some of the open teaching positions occurred when teachers followed the former principal to her new school, which has put the school in a difficult situation.

A strong leadership team is critical to the success of a principal, especially a new principal. Jennifer has had challenges with working with her assistant principal. Her assistant principal does help her regarding handling some of the stress, but Jennifer really needs someone who has more initiative. She shared, "I want her to engage in some of the work with the same level of passion and intensity that I have. Attendance has been an issue and continues to be an issue." Jennifer shared how she has spent most of the summer by herself doing all the planning and set-up for the new year. She had to cancel her own vacation because she did not have her assistant principal at work during the summer. She said, "ultimately, it's not the responsibility of the assistant principal, it's my responsibility to make sure these things get done. So, I came back from vacation." This challenge has continued into the new year with the assistant principal taking a lot of time off for personal reasons. Jennifer said, "I'm trying to be supportive and empathetic, but I have to delegate her responsibilities across the school and ask people to take on even more." She is recognizing the importance of having an assistant principal and the impacts

when you do not have one. This has added stress to the principal role as Jennifer has had to take on discipline, testing, substitutes, and many other tasks.

Jennifer struggled with the stresses of being a new principal. She said:

I was coming in sick. I was coming in just exhausted, just still trying to go, go, go. I was having a lot of problems with my health, I was extremely stressed, my blood pressure was elevated for months, and my doctor could not figure it out. She finally said, ‘you know it may be your work.’ And that was the most hurtful thing for me to hear because it is like, I went through all of this to get here in my career, but I can’t allow this to kill me.

A lot of the stress was coming from meeting the school goals. The school had done very well the year prior and now she had to maintain or improve upon that. She also had “tough shoes to fill.” She shared, “I always wonder if things would have been different for me if I was appointed at a different school because I could reestablish myself as a principal.”

Work-life Balance

Jennifer has the support of her husband when it comes to understanding the workload of a school principal. He is her “sounding board.” She works hard to try not to bring too much work home with her. She said:

I just give so much while I am here, when I get home, I have to turn it off. I fail at it sometimes because I’m still checking emails, still getting messages about who won’t be coming in. My husband always reminds me to set boundaries, but it is hard.

She can dedicate most of her time away from work to her family because she makes to-do lists during the day and tries to complete the list before going home for the day. Jennifer has gotten to

the point where she knows if she doesn't complete her list, she can pick back up on it the next day instead of feeling like she has to complete it at home.

Feedback

When talking about the various challenges of being a first-year principal, Jennifer could not think of any specific feedback given to her regarding how she handled those challenges. She did say that her region support person would check-in on her and provide words of encouragement. Jennifer said people saw her as "the little engine that could." Someone that just kept going regardless of the stresses around her. But there was not necessarily "a lot of emotional and mental support for me, everybody pushes wellness, but the way that I was trying to support my teachers with wellness, I didn't necessarily feel that same support."

Principal Supports

One request that Jennifer has for principal support or training is around time management and the new state benchmarks. She receives some weekly support from her region leadership. She participates in weekly calls that are immensely helpful to her and she feels free to speak to region leadership when they visit her school.

Jennifer would love to have some scheduled times to visit or shadow other successful principals. She was able to participate in a program last year for novice principals that she felt was valuable. It only lasted a brief time, and she really missed that support. She said, "It was very helpful and beneficial. There were different principals who came and shared pieces of information with us about all different the things, and they gave us resources. The framework would be ideal to continue."

Jennifer had a mentor, but she never actually met her mentor. She shared, “It was challenging for us to meet, and then I was in survival mode, she would send me things, but it would get lost in my email.” If she were to receive a mentor again, she would like to see dedicated time established to meet and collaborate with them.

Looking Towards the Future

Jennifer sees herself continuing in the principal role in the next few years and perfecting her craft as a leader. She said:

I don’t know if there’s such a thing as a master principal, but ultimately, I would like to be a superstar principal that has all of the elements in place, sustaining the school culture, sustaining the relationships with stakeholders and community, improving student achievement, like a proven track record.

At one point her goal had been to become an executive director for the district, but that has been put on hold for the time being. She said her plan is to build her principal resume and show sustained excellence as a principal before thinking about any other positions.

Reflections on Being a New Principal

Jennifer is looking forward to the new year as she feels that she now has a staff that want to be there at the school with her as the leader. She said:

I felt like my first year there were people who were here who didn’t want to be here, and they were only here because they couldn’t go where they wanted to go, so now that they have an opportunity to leave, I feel like I have a solid group of people who are here and committed to the work.

She is going to maintain a positive school culture and work this upcoming year on “keeping everybody happy and upbeat and wanting to come to work and not quit.” So far, she feels that the culture has changed. Teachers feel more comfortable with the leadership team than last year. They know now that they are there to support them and therefore go to them for assistance.

In year two, Jennifer says she feels more confident and is a better leader going into year two. She shared:

I am more confident in my ability to lead and make decisions. In year one, I was trying to figure things out, and still kind of shifting from the role of assistant principal to some degree, but now it’s like I’m very clear on what my role is and how to support and lead the staff.

She is going to be more intentional this upcoming year in the support of novice teachers and making sure they have a mentor. She is working to ensure to plan professional development for all the new curriculum and benchmarks. Another focus for the new year is providing collaborative time for teachers to visit each other’s classrooms. She knows the teachers want this time, but she will need to plan for it to happen. Jennifer plans on being very intentional with “building relationships amongst teachers so that they can depend on each other, and they feel comfortable going to their peers for support and collaboration.”

Something she has learned from year one is that she must really lay things out explicitly. She said, “I don’t feel like that was always a strong point for me, but I’ve realized that if I lay everything out, then now I’ve kind of eliminated all possible excuses as to why it’s not being done.” She said she creates a week-at-a-glance for the teachers that lays everything out. It is a way to front-load them with information so there is “no room for errors.” She talked about how

she thought everyone taught like she did and in this role, she is finding that is not the case and so there is a need to lay out expectations.

Jennifer would not describe year two as easier than year one. She did say that it is easier in that she knows what to expect. She said, “I won’t say it’s easier. It’s like I’ve overcome last year’s challenges, but I kind of have a different set of challenges this year.” She shared that during year one her focus was on maintaining the school grade and keeping her job. While this year “is like supporting teachers a little bit more, school culture, school climate, and continue with academics and instruction.”

If she could change anything about the principal role, Jennifer would like to see some of the responsibilities reduced. She said, “It’s just a lot. And you just don’t realize how much it is until you are in that position.” She talked about the differences between elementary and secondary, where secondary has a dean, assistant principals of curriculum, and testing coordinators to name a few. Additional personnel could help relieve some of the stresses due to high responsibilities.

Jennifer feels like she had a successful first year. She said, “Initially I didn’t because when I looked around at the performance of the other schools around me, my school was one of the schools that dropped when everybody else around me went up.” She then started looking at the data and realized that the year before, her school was one of the only schools to have gone up. She also realized that since the school received the high scores, there has been a lot of teacher turnover. She said, “40% of the people in the building are new, and I still have vacancies. So, the school that was here three years ago under the previous administration to get those results, half

of the people are gone.” So, she does feel successful and is looking forward to the rest of the school year.

Jennifer’s Structural Description

This section will present a structural description of Jennifer’s personal and professional experiences that have influenced her role as principal. The structural description gives deeper meaning and interpretation to Jennifer’s words. The structural description has been broken down into the following themes: (1) interpersonal qualities, (2) qualities of a highly effective teacher, (3) limited exposure during assistant principal experience, (4) weight of the principalship, (5) time management skills, (6) going it alone versus developing a team, (7) principal support, and (8) feedback and reflection.

Intrapersonal Qualities

Jennifer possesses some intrapersonal qualities that have impacted her as a new principal. First, she possesses perseverance. She shared that she experienced domestic abuse at home and that she moved around a lot as a child causing her to go in and out of different schools. Despite these challenges that she faced, Jennifer was able to persevere and was a successful student. Her teachers recognized how smart she was and how she was able to keep pushing through her home situation. She had teachers who believed in her and pushed her to challenge herself in her work. Jennifer also showed perseverance during college when she knew she needed to go home to help her brother, but she also knew she needed to complete her degree. She brings this perseverance into the principal role as she works through the various challenges of the role. Jennifer lists multiple challenges throughout her first year. One major challenge was working with her assistant principal. She had certain expectations set for her assistant principal who was not able

to live up to those expectations. Jennifer worked through that challenge by taking on many of the roles herself and just getting the job done. She mentioned several times that no matter what the obstacle is, she gets the work done.

Jennifer has learned that for her to put her all into something, she must be passionate about it. This first became clear for her when she was going to college for architecture. She was great at drawing and thought that would work to her benefit in pursuing architecture, but she soon realized that she was not passionate about many of the concepts of architecture. This quality of excelling when she is passionate has helped her in the role of principal. Jennifer is very passionate about instructional leadership. She loves lesson planning with teachers and helping them to perfect their craft. She shared that she may have spent too much time on this in year one because she is just so passionate about it. She shared that she did not spend as much time as needed on developing teacher morale because it is not a passion for her. Jennifer has recognized this and understands that she must balance her focus on some things that she may not be so passionate about. This passion has also kept her in the seat of the principalship. She acknowledges how challenging the role is, but because it is a passion for her, she continues to work at being better each year.

Jennifer is an introvert and she spoke about how this has impacted her life. She is noticeably quiet and reflective, but if she is very passionate about something, she usually shines in that area and the passion helps her come out of her shyness. She commented that some people do not see her as an introvert because she hides it very well. She shared that as a principal she has some anxiety over certain tasks and roles because she is an introvert but forces herself not to think about it and just does it. Leading a controversial shared decision-making meeting is on

example of a situation that is sometimes intimidating for Jennifer, as well as meeting with the parent stakeholder groups. They are not her favorite activities, but she has developed strategies for getting these tasks done where no one notices her discomfort.

One other quality that Jennifer possesses is that she is a rule-follower and not one to take too many risks until she is confident of the outcomes. She talked about teachers coming to her and asking her why she was not doing certain things that the previous principal did. Her response was that she was trying to follow the rules as she knows them and that she does not have enough experience yet to know when she can step out of the lines. Jennifer shared that she is by the book and likes structure and order and that brings her safety and comfort and sometimes others do not understand that. The challenge this brings is that some teachers have been able to do their own thing in the past and now she is trying to show them the right way to do things and the teachers are not all receptive to this.

Qualities of a Highly Effective Teacher

Jennifer learned from an early age that a highly effective teacher finds things in students that set them apart and works to pull that out of them. She learned this from great teachers she had through her early years and through college. She brought this same aspect to her own classroom when she became a teacher. Jennifer worked as a classroom teacher for ten years before going into educational leadership. During her ten years, she was a highly effective, distinguished teacher with remarkably high growth scores for her students. She gives credit for her success to the strong coaches she had in her first few years of teaching who taught her best practices. Jennifer taught at one school for five years and then transitioned to another school on her own accord. She really wanted to challenge herself to see if she could replicate her results at

another school. At her new school, there were no coaches to help the teachers and so Jennifer learned to be a strong teacher leader. She coached other teachers and mentored novice teachers. It was through this work that Jennifer learned how to work with adults, deal with push back and conflict, and how to facilitate professional development. These are all skills that she was able to use when she transitioned into the role of principal. Because Jennifer is always a teacher at heart, she can provide excellent instructional support to the teachers at her school.

Limited Exposure During Assistant Principal Experience

Jennifer served as an assistant principal for five years under one principal and at the same school she is currently serving as principal. She described her experience as a gradual release over the five years. Her principal was one who liked to have her hands on everything happening at the school and so it was hard for Jennifer to feel like she was leading or making decisions on her own. Since she came right from being a classroom teacher, it was a bit of a learning curve for her as an AP. She shared that she did not realize all the things that occurred outside of the classroom. Some of the things that were a surprise were the deep planning that goes into the common planning sessions, the multiple meetings with parents who have various concerns, and the many different things that teachers want your advice about. One thing she knew she was good at was instruction and so that was her area of focus for year one. She helped teachers master their craft while also learning the organization of managing a school. Jennifer completed the normal tasks of an assistant principal which were discipline, testing, and dealing with parent concerns. Each year of her time as assistant principal, she would add on a new focus such as culture and climate, data analysis, classroom observations and providing feedback. She did not get a full release until the summer prior to her principalship when her principal put her in charge

of summer school. This was the first time that Jennifer felt like she was making the decisions and developing systems on her own. On multiple occasions Jennifer described this feeling of a curtain drawn back and exposing the true role of the assistant principal and principal. It was like she thought she knew what the role was until she was in it and then she felt like it was all a massive surprise. Jennifer shared that it may have been helpful if she had more experiences early on as an assistant principal. She would have liked more tasks delegated to her and more opportunities to lead certain areas to better prepare her for the principalship.

Weight of the Principalship

Jennifer carried a lot of stress during her first year as a principal due to the demands of the job. She felt as though other people saw her as “the little engine that could” because she just kept going despite the challenges. However, this took a toll on her health. She began to get sick with headaches and was coming into work sick. She described a feeling of exhaustion and stress. She had elevated blood pressure for months, and her doctor finally told her that it could be due to her job. It was overwhelming for her to hear this since she had worked so hard to get to this point in her career. Jennifer never shared this with her supervisors or anyone else at work.

Jennifer shared that if anything could change about the role of principal, she would like to see some of the responsibilities lifted. She stated multiple times that the job “is a lot.” She feels that the expectation to wear so many different hats is almost impossible and does not allow principals to do all of them well and that is where the stress comes in. She wants to be able to complete everything, but it is physically impossible.

Time Management Skills

Jennifer first had experience with time management as a classroom teacher. It is hard to become an effective teacher if you are not able to accomplish your goals for the day and week. Jennifer did this by being very intentional with her lesson planning. As an assistant principal, she had some struggles with splitting her time between the importance of being in the classrooms and the many tasks of an assistant principal. Again, she was able to balance her time by setting timelines and schedules for herself. Now in the principal role there are some additional challenges with time management and prioritizing tasks. Some of these challenges are tight timelines where people are asking her for things immediately, whether it is the district office or a parent who needs to see her immediately. These things take her away from her to-do list that she creates. She has learned that she can put the paperwork tasks towards the end of the day to help her get some of the more important work done during the day. Jennifer tries to keep her work and home life as separate as possible. She tries to not take work home with her, but sometimes there are some things she must do at night or on the weekend. To do this, she often must stay late at work.

Going It Alone Versus Developing a Strong Team

Jennifer understands the impact a strong team can have on student achievement. She learned this through her work with some amazing coaches and principals when she was a teacher. An assistant principal plays a significant role in supporting the principal and helping to be a part of this strong team. Unfortunately, Jennifer has an assistant principal who does not seem motivated to do the work. She has health issues and misses a lot of work. Jennifer has felt like she had to do a lot of the work alone this past year. Moving into the new year, she still has

the same AP, but Jennifer has decided to lean on the other members of her leadership team to delegate some of the tasks and to have others to bounce ideas off.

Another part of building a strong team as a new principal is weeding out those staff members that are not on board with the vision and mission of the school. Jennifer felt that she had teachers who did not want to be at the school under her leadership. Having the ability this upcoming year to interview and hire people that want to work for her is exciting for Jennifer. She shared that there feels like a full culture shift this year where teachers want to work together and with the leadership team to have influence at the school. The staff was already reaching out to her over the summer and asking what they could do to help prepare for the new year. The teachers want to meet with their grade level teams to plan together and teachers are excited about sharing ideas between grade levels as well. Jennifer gave a great example of a project one teacher came up with and shared with the staff. Everyone got very excited about working together on the project and it brought the staff and students together as a school community.

Principal Support

Jennifer talked about collaborating with other principals as her main system of support. Although they helped her when needed, she did not feel like she was getting a lot of emotional and mental support that she needed as a beginning principal. Jennifer shared how she became ill during her first years as a principal and her doctor shared that it was because of her job. This was very stressful for her to hear because she had worked for so long to get to this job. Jennifer dealt with this alone and did not share it with her supervisors, not did her supervisors ask about her health and well-being during these first two years.

Jennifer finds the district and region leadership to be supportive. She did say that the district could look at some of the timelines that they set for principals as many are unrealistic. The short timelines given to principals takes them away from some of the more important work, such as instructional leadership, that they must do during the school day. She also mentioned that at times the district does not follow-through with things, even though principals may have done everything they were supposed to do. This adds to the principal's stress because they are the ones that must explain the lack of follow-through.

As far as region leadership support, Jennifer feels comfortable with them. She has weekly calls that provide little nuggets for the week to stay on track. She also shared that her region support gives her words of encouragement when needed.

Jennifer participated in a new principal boot camp during the summer prior to her first year as principal. She found this boot camp beneficial and was disappointed when it ended abruptly when the facilitator took another role. This was an opportunity to gain experience from experienced principals in the district. During this time, Jennifer had a mentor but never actually met with mentor. She said that her mentor would send her emails, but the emails were already overwhelming. Jennifer stated she would like to spend time shadowing more experienced principals to learn from them and she would like to visit successful schools to learn from them as well.

Feedback and Reflection

When it comes to feedback, Jennifer was not able to identify any specific feedback that she received. She sees her region leadership as supportive, but not as someone who gives her specific feedback on her work as a principal.

Jennifer has used this past summer to reflect on her first year of the principalship and to determine goals for the new year. One thing she has thought a lot about is the ability and need to provide emotional support to the teachers. She shared that this was incredibly challenging for her because she is hyper focused on the instructional work. She is committed to focusing on the emotional supports because she knows this will help get the work done.

Another focus for the new year after reflecting on the previous year is to support teachers more. Support to her novice teachers will be providing more frequent feedback and partnering them with a strong mentor. For the more experienced teachers, they will be getting new curriculum and new benchmarks and will need support through strong common planning sessions. Jennifer will ensure she dedicates time for this and she herself is prepared to coach them on the new things. She also commits to providing more collaborative time for teachers to learn from one another this year.

Jennifer feels more confident going into year two because now she knows what to expect in the day-to-day life of a principal. She knows she will encounter new challenges, but she feels more prepared to face those challenges. She felt like the first year was all about transitioning from assistant principal to principal and now she feels like it is truly her school following her vision. She also shared that she feels she is being more intentional in this second year with the way that she is providing feedback and giving support to each individual teacher. She said her second year is a little easier than last year because she knows what to anticipate, but not easier because she has a new set of challenges this year. Overall, it was a successful year, and she is looking forward to year two.

Composite Textural Description (All Participants)

This section will present a composite textural description of all five participants' (not just the two focus principals) personal and professional experiences that have influenced their role as principal. The composite textural description is given using the participants' words with no interpretation. The experiences have been broken down into the following categories as derived in my data analysis: (1) growing up, (2) personal school experiences, (3) teaching experience, (4) coaching experience (5) assistant principal experience, (6) personal characteristics, (7) diversity, (8) track for principalship, (9) principal selection, (10) emotions (11) roles of principalship, (12) a day in the life of a new principal, (13) feeling success, (14) challenges, (15) work-life balance, (16) feedback, (17) principal supports, (18) looking towards the future, and (19) reflections on being a new principal.

Growing Up

Two of the three participants grew up in a small rural town with little diversity, while three of the participants grew up in the same diverse, urban area where they are now principals. All the participants shared that their families valued education.

Personal School Experiences

Each of the principals described enjoying school. They each did very well in school and have fond memories of teachers who stood out to them. While only one participant recalls taking on leadership activities in high school, the others all participated in team based extracurricular activities such as sports, cheerleading, and chorus which gave them opportunities to gain experience how to work together as a team. For college, only one of the participants went in as an education major. The other participants chose majors such as business, engineering, pre-med

and architecture. Three out of the five participants graduated with a degree in education and therefore had teaching experience through internship opportunities.

Teaching Experience

All the participants were successful classroom teachers. They defined success by having high student achievement data and the opportunity to coach and mentor other teachers. They each had an opportunity to work in diverse, high needs schools where they learned the importance of building relationships, analyzing data, and designing high impact lesson plans. When describing their success, all the principals referred to collaborating with strong supportive coaches as a teacher. One participant shared, “my math coach was like an angel. He as a coach saw me as a human first, but he knew math and how to teach and he did not give up on me” (Kelly). Another participant shared, “I had some really phenomenal coaches when I was in the classroom who taught me best practices” (Jennifer). The participants had a variety of different years of teaching with some only having taught three years before going into coaching, while others taught over ten years before going to the next level.

Coaching Experience

All the principals had some sort of coaching experience whether it was formally holding the title of coach or coaching as a lead teacher. Three of the principals held the title of coach with two of them coaching for the same district they are now principals for while the other worked for an outside company, but still worked within the same district. Two of the principals led teacher professional learning communities in their buildings and served as mentors to other teachers as teacher leaders. They all credit this coaching experience as something that really helped to prepare them for the principalship. It was in this role where they learned the importance of

instructional leadership, how to work with adults, how to gain buy-in from teachers, how to analyze data, and how to keep the focus on student achievement. One participant said, “I knew I needed to build relationships with the teachers, so they would gain my trust, so that I could coach them and be the best math team that we can be” (Mary). Another shared:

I had goals for each teacher, so depending on what they believed they needed and what I thought they needed, we set goals and priorities and I just did my best to coach and encourage them. I learned so much working with adults, it was a good middle step between teaching and becoming an administrator” (Kelly).

The two participants who coached as teachers both indicated that it may have been beneficial to have been formally in the coaching role prior to becoming an administrator, but they were still able to learn some things by being a teacher leader. One shared:

I was an unofficial math coach. I would lead data discussions and the differentiation piece was my strong suite, so I shared that with teachers as well. I really took what I had learned and tried to implement and help the other teachers as well (Amy).

Assistant Principal Experience

Four of the five participants started their administrative career in the same district that they are now principals. The fifth participant started her career in another state but was not in the position long before moving to her current district. Three of the four that started in their current district all participated in the district Aspiring Leaders program. Most enjoyed the program and thought it prepared them well for the role. One shared, “the AP program was very, very meaningful. Everything had a purpose; it was very aligned to what we needed to know to be a

successful assistant principal” (Amy). Upon completing the program, they each went right into an assistant principal role.

Although most participants felt like their preparation programs were good, they shared in some of the same struggles of being an AP. Time management was a common struggle for the participants. The district that they work for does not have a roles and responsibilities guidebook for their APs and so figuring out the role was challenging as new things were coming at them daily. One principal shared:

Once I got into my second year, then it was like focusing more on the classroom observations and giving feedback because I had a really good handle on managing my time in terms of discipline, testing and logistics, so now I could dedicate that time towards being in the classrooms and supporting the teachers (Jennifer).

Another participant shared, “I like to do things start to finish, but sometimes that was not possible. You need to figure out what to prioritize and figure out what is most important” (Amy).

Most of the participants shared struggles they were having with the technical side of being an assistant principal like figuring out testing, discipline, and meeting with disgruntled parents. Another topic that come up was the challenge around the transformative work as an assistant principal. All five of the participants worked at challenging, Title I schools as assistant principals. With this comes a need to do transformative work to change the trajectory of the students and school. One participant shared, “I think the transformative work is what you are not prepared for, but if you have that part in your heart and mind, you’re able to figure out that part as well” (Kelly).

All the principals stated that their experiences as an assistant principal helped them when they became a principal, but there were various levels of exposure for each of them. The one participant that had the most exposure as an assistant principal shared, “I knew the role was to support the principal in every capacity. I didn’t question it. I did everything I was asked to do and then some. I was exposed to everything” (Mary). Another who had less exposure stated, “I would have liked more on thinking about what direction you want the school to go in. She (her principal) liked to control things a little bit, so I was not part of the decision, just implementing the decision” (Amy). All the participants shared that they had little to no experience with the budgeting process as assistant principals.

None of the assistant principals felt intentionally coached to become future principals. One participant shared:

I don’t think there were systems or structure set up for her (principal) to be in a position to coach me to be a principal. She didn’t have a ton of extra time. It’s not in her best interest for me to be a principal either, you know (Kelly).

Another shared:

Who would be coaching me? My principal? My principal knew my aspirations, and what I do believe she did for me, was she gave me opportunities to experience administrative duties, and I believe through experience, it could be some form of coaching, but not necessarily coaching (Mary).

A third participant shared, “Yeah, no one trained me. I think I would try to advocate and ask to be a part of things” (Maggie).

Personal Characteristics

The participants share some of the same personal characteristics. Four of the five describe themselves as introverts, while one is more of an extravert. As an introvert, they are very reflective and like to think through their decisions. Jennifer gives a good example of this when she shared that teachers expected her to respond just like the previous principal. She had to explain that she liked to collect the information, think on it, and then come back with a decision. The teachers understood her a little bit better when she explained this. Another common characteristic is being self-motivated and self-starters. One participant shared, “I study a lot, I read a lot of books, and I do a lot of listening” (Kelly). Another participant said, “I am a self-driven person. I research, I ask questions and I am not afraid of not knowing” (Mary). Finally, most of the participants are also people who set goals for themselves and then work to accomplish those goals. One participant shared:

I didn’t feel like I could grow anymore here. I gave myself a personal challenge, I wanted to go to a new school and see if I could get the same great results if I put myself in a more challenging setting. I succeeded. I received a bonus three years in a row for my average being consistently higher than the district (Jennifer).

Diversity

Three of the five principals grew up in a diverse community and then went on to teach and lead diverse, Title I schools. Their experiences growing up in the same community have helped them address the needs of the students they serve. Two of the participants grew up in small rural areas and did not experience diversity until college. For both, college was a “culture shock” and took some adjustment. The experiences in college have helped them both understand how to work with and navigate situations dealing with diversity. One participant shared:

Being the only white person in a black school led by black leadership, which was very powerful, and listening to them and to be able to translate to them what I am thinking with the different cultural differences in language and to understand that we're working towards the same thing we just may be explaining things differently was powerful (Kelly).

While another participant shared, “just being culturally aware of who your audience is can help you move students” (Maggie).

Track for Principalship

The track to principalship was similar for most of the participants. They were all working for the current school district prior to becoming a principal. To become a principal in this district, you must have Level II certification for School Principal. Maggie was the only one who already had this distinction prior to coming to the district. The others earned this certification through the district's Rising Leaders program. The participants all felt that the program was beneficial in that it helped give them a more global view of education. However, they did feel that it was more theory than practical application. One principal shared, “I did appreciate the global perspective that I got in reference to getting a mindset of competing globally” (Mary). Another shared, “it was definitely more focused on the theory and kind of understanding of having that global view and moving instruction forward. Also, it helped us think deeper about the administrative role, not the day-to-day tasks of the role” (Amy).

Principal Selection

Four of the five principals participated in a principal forum to become a principal at their school. The forum included three candidates who all interviewed in front of teachers and

community members. The teachers and community members were then able to vote for who they wanted to be their next principal. All four of the candidates felt that this was a good process that allowed the community to have voice in who their next principal would be. One participant shared, “It was intimidating initially, but it gives parents the opportunity to get to know the principals” (Jennifer). Another shared:

I thought it (forum) was good. It gave the community a voice and it gave the faculty a voice, and that’s important in our line of work, at least they are heard, and they have a voice because you can put someone in the wrong place, that’s not a right fit (Maggie).

Two of the principals have already moved to new schools within their first two years as principals. There is not a forum process when transferring sitting principals to new schools.

Maggie shared, “I was placed at my new school, where that is a big difference, whereas my last school got to choose. This staff didn’t have a say, didn’t have a voice, so it’s a different feel.”

Emotions

All the participants shared the same initial emotion when becoming a new principal and that was excitement. They had all been working hard to get to this point and were excited to start the role. Soon after the excitement, they began to feel some other mixed emotions. Many of them felt the weight of the principalship. One shared, “Wow, this is a lot. There’s a lot of pieces to the puzzle. That weight really came on probably that first two weeks. It’s just enormous weight and a lot stressful” (Amy). Another participant said, “it was an awesome responsibility of now what, I can sink this ship, or I can keep it afloat, or I can sail off into the wild, it was all up to me” (Maggie). Another emotion described was exhaustion. One of the principals shared:

You just hear a lot of stuff a lot of the time. And so, I definitely had compassion fatigue for the first time in my life. I was just really tired. I also felt on a mission to do right by our kids, but that too is exhausting (Kelly).

Roles of the Principal

Although the participants listed many distinct roles of the principalship, there were some commonalities. All of them listed instructional leadership as one of the most important roles of the principalship. Alongside that one, they talked about the importance of safety, building culture, developing family and community engagement, organizational leadership and dealing with professional behaviors of the staff.

With instructional leadership, all participants felt that their backgrounds as teachers and coaches aided them in understanding the aspects of leading instruction. They felt that they knew how to create buy-in around lesson planning, data use, and curriculum use. They enjoy going into classrooms, observing teaching, and providing feedback to the teachers. One participant shared, “my role is to oversee that instruction is happening in alignment to standards, and that teachers have the opportunity to be developed in their practice as planners of curriculum but also as executioners of the curriculum” (Kelly). Another participant shared:

My role is to have a good understanding of good instruction, being familiar and aware of what teachers should be teaching and students should be learning at all times across all content areas, knowing the importance of doing frequent walkthroughs and giving teachers feedback, and progress monitoring student data regularly and having those conversations during common planning (Jennifer).

The importance of safety came up multiple times from the participants. This is one area that participants feel they could have used more training on before becoming a principal or during their first year, especially when it comes to the specific safety features of their own building. Mary shared:

My priority was safety first and academics second if somebody gets hurt that's a problem, we can clean up academics, I can't clean up a child missing, I can't clean up somebody fighting in the cafeteria or if someone falls on a bench that we knew was broken. So, everything that comes up was organized by safety first, then academics.

Another participant shared, “every building is different and so safety in every building is different. I think formulating a best practice training for principals around safety would be amazing” (Kelly).

All the principals talked about the role of organizational leadership. For most of them organizational leadership dealt with the systems in place for a well-organized school. One of the first things mentioned was developing schedules for the school. For some, scheduling comes very easily to them and for others they struggle a little with scheduling and allow others to do it for them. Two of the principals talked about how they had to continuously change their schedules during their first year of the principalship. This caused frustration for the principals and for the staff members. These changes were necessary because the schedules built were not working as planned or because there was new staff in the building. Maggie shared:

Scheduling was probably my weakest area; I typically leave that to the assistant principal.

I do understand there is a method to the madness and that you have to be very strategic to

make sure there are blocks of time that are uninterrupted, so it truly is the backbone of the school.

All the participants shared how one of their roles was dealing with professional standards. They each were able to describe situations where they had to speak to a teacher or staff member concerning their professional behaviors. All the participants agreed that the process was very time consuming, yet necessary. They each shared that they depend on the district Professional Standards department to guide them on all the steps to follow during staff misconduct.

Finally, all the participants talked about the importance of building a strong school culture in their building as one of their roles. Most of the participants described building this culture through developing relationships with staff members, students, and community. One participant shared:

Another role of the principal is a culture cultivator. Someone who's responsible for the school environment which is everything like the physical infrastructure of the place as well as how people are treated in customer service and overall way of work" (Kelly).

While another participant shared, "Making connections and relationships, being really intentional about that as a principal is important. Also understanding different personalities and how to work around all of those personalities is important. You have to have soft skills to get the buy-in" (Mary).

A Day in the Life of a New Principal

The participants shared remarkably similar descriptions of their day as a principal. Typically, they start their day prior to everyone coming to the building. They use this time to review their emails, prepare for their day, and have their cup of coffee. Next, they all go out to

arrival so that they can greet their teachers, students, and parents. Once the school day is in motion, they each spend their mornings visiting classrooms. One difference is that some of them are very intentional about which classrooms they are going to see. Three out of the five participants create a schedule with which classrooms they are going to see on which days and what times. The other two participants visit classrooms, but they are not as intentional. One participant said:

Then I am off to classrooms for at least an hour, and I am very strategic in the classrooms that I pick and when I pick to go. I try to go to at least five or six classrooms within the hour (Amy).

All participants then shared that they try to make a stop at the cafeteria during the students' lunch times. This is an opportunity for the students to get to see them and to make sure that students are following the cafeteria procedures. In the afternoons four out of the five principals shared that they make another round of classroom visits and then head to assist with dismissal at the end of the day. Once all the students are gone, all the participants shared that they use this time to check and answer emails, respond to any parent phone calls, and plan for their next day. The principals shared that they typically leave their buildings between 4:30 PM and 6:00 PM with a few days needing to be longer. Four out of the five principals have been able to create systems that allow for disruptions to be at a minimum and allows them to follow their schedule. The only time their schedule changes is when it is a common planning day or there are prescheduled meetings.

Feeling Success

All the principals were able to identify successes in their first few years of the principalship. Two of the principals shared that their success was because they met with the staff

prior to the school year to find out what they really liked about the school and what were some of the challenges. The principals then worked on small wins where they could fix some of those things that needed a change. This built trust with the teachers and showed them that the principals were really listening to them. One principal shared:

I went back and looked at my quick wins because everybody gave me something deep that they wanted to see changed maybe something about the culture, but then everybody also gave me something small like they wish there were trash cans outside at recess or they wish there were books clustered for Black history. Those are quick wins and so I highlighted those and set goals. Ok within the first three months I'm going to take care of those quick things, then six months I'll have these next things taken care of and so at the end of the year everyone's quick wins were done. They got to see not only will I listen, but I'm going to act on what you're saying and you taking the time to share with me where you're at will not be in vain. They were excited to have a voice (Kelly).

Another participant shared:

During my first two weeks I scheduled interviews to meet with everyone and ask them some questions there were some simple things that teachers wanted such as tables instead of desks in their classroom or the CSS team, they didn't have any planning or they felt like they didn't have scheduled planning, so I made sure that that was in the schedule. Those were my ways of letting them know that I heard what they're saying, and I implemented some of those changes. I think that helped with building trust during my first year (Mary).

Another area of success for the participants was in instructional leadership. Four out of the five participants were able to ensure that their teachers had weekly planning sessions. In these sessions principals met with teachers to create lesson plans, look at data, and plan for the needs of the students. The challenging work that they put in around instructional leadership paid off when they received their student achievement data.

Challenges

The participants shared in some of the same challenges being a new principal. The one common challenge that came up with all participants is that of time management. With time management the issue of prioritizing tasks also came up. All the participants wanted to be able to do their jobs efficiently, but there was so much coming at them that it was challenging to determine what to tackle first. One participant shared:

I have a very hard time starting a task and being called away because there's a signature needed or there's a phone call in the office or there is an angry parent or there are so many more things, that I have started to become the post-it girl and there are post-its all over the place because I have a lot of trouble trying to manage. Not necessarily trying to manage, but truly figuring out what I need to prioritize and giving myself grace that everything doesn't have to be done right now. It is very hard for me (Amy).

Another participant shared, “Managing my time was a challenge because of the responsibilities. You're responsible for everything and I think it's not just managing time. It's prioritizing tasks as well and knowing what is a priority and that's not easy” (Mary).

Another challenge that the participants faced was not knowing where to go for support or to ask questions. Most of the participants felt comfortable going to their district leadership for

support or to district offices, but there was some fear that people may see them as incompetent if they asked questions. Kelly shared:

I think one of the most challenging things has been navigating who to go to with what there seems to be a lack of organization with resources and personnel at a higher level and so I have not enjoyed spending so much time circling back on emails and being forwarded to this person to ask the same question to this person. It gets really, really tedious.

Another participant shared:

I didn't know who to ask. That was the bottom line. I did not. I did not know who to ask. Everyone needs a circle of trust. A circle of people that will have your back. I'm still trying to figure out who's in my circle (Maggie).

A district wide challenge that the principals shared was filling vacancies and finding substitutes. In many ways the principals felt like they were a one man show because many of their support staff was filling in as substitutes in classrooms with no teachers. Maggie shared, “no one was really able to do their jobs or what they were hired to do. They (coaches and interventionists) were in classrooms where there was no teacher.” Another participant shared, “not a lot of people want to work at a school that looks like mine. It really makes it hard. So just mentally trying to prepare to open a school with vacancies is challenging” (Jennifer).

One final challenge that the participant shared was that four out of five principals experienced difficulties with their assistant principal. There were a variety of reasons why it was challenging but each of them felt that their assistant principal was unable to provide support. In each of these situations someone selected the assistant principal other than the principal. In the

new year all but one of them will be working with a new assistant principal and one that they have chosen. The principals are excited about the opportunity to work with someone they selected and who shares the same values and mindset as them. One participant shared, “I want my new assistant principal to be well-rounded and I want him to feel supported in his new role. Creating roles and responsibilities for him will help me delegate some of the important tasks” (Mary). Another shared:

My AP is new to the role and when we had our interview, I made sure that our morals, our values, were like minded. I listened to her keywords. I heard a lot about teamwork. I heard the things that I wanted to hear from her without asking specific questions. I sat down with her that first day and said listen these are your roles and responsibilities as an assistant principal. I was very clear with her” (Amy).

Work-Life Balance

Most of the participants have been able to develop a healthy work life balance. Many of them learned this through their experiences as an assistant principal. Most of them shared that when they are home, they are home for their family. Even with this mindset, a few of them still take work home with them and work in the evenings and on the weekends. One principal who lives far from her school, spends two to three days a week away from her family so that when she does go home, she is able to focus on her family. Two of the participants have had health impacts due to the stressful nature of their job.

Feedback

All the participants shared that they have not received formal feedback as a new principal. They have received a formal evaluation but that did not give them specific next steps

for them to grow as a principal. All of them seem to crave feedback so that they can improve on their practice. One participant shared, “As far as feedback I didn't feel safe, I felt it was more of a gotcha. That I wasn't doing anything right. That's discouraging, extremely discouraging, because there were no next steps” (Maggie). Another principal shared, “I can't really pinpoint any specific feedback. It may have been something casual but nothing specific” (Jennifer).

Principal Supports

Most of the principals spoke about a new principal boot camp that they participated in during the summer before their first principalship. This was a positive experience for all of them. They valued getting to hear from experienced principals and receiving some of the resources that they use in their own buildings. They appreciated the opportunity to connect with other new principals who were facing some of the same challenges as themselves. Unfortunately, the new principal boot camp was short lived as the facilitator changed roles and the program was not continued. Amy shared:

I think we strive off of relationships and having an opportunity to build those relationships and have those relationships in place and then meet with the same group of people over the year because we're going to have the same stresses at the same time throughout the year.

And Jennifer shared, “I thought the boot camp would get us through. That it would be our survival camp the first year and I was really looking forward to that because we were all in that together as first year principals.”

All the participants had a mentor at least during their first year of the principalship, however most of the participants did not feel the benefits of having a mentor. It was incredibly

challenging for them to find time to meet with their mentor. Most of the participants relied on other principal friends for support.

Another type of support that all the participants had was regional leadership. Three out of the five participants felt that their regional leadership was supportive and felt comfortable going to them for support. One participant was indifferent about the support provided by regional leadership, while the final participant said that her regional leadership caused her a great deal of stress. There were a variety of feelings about whether regional leadership provided a safe space for new principals to share their challenges and ask for support.

The district provides monthly principal meetings for all principals; however, the participants feel that these meetings were strictly around procedural tasks. They focused on what needed completion and not necessarily on how to complete them. As a new principal there was some fear in asking questions. All five of the participants shared they would have benefited from differentiated professional development geared towards the needs of new principals.

Looking Towards the Future

All the principals are excited about their future as a principal in this district. They all shared how they would like to become more proficient in their roles over the next couple of years. Jennifer said, “I see myself just perfecting my craft as a leader and becoming a master principal.” While Mary shared:

I see myself with the same team. I want to see the same people over time and see that we have become a well-oiled machine. I want to see where I'm no longer just this head leader, but everybody is leading.

Reflections on Being a New Principal

All the participants feel like they are going into the next year more confident to lead than the year before. They shared that there is a comfort in knowing what to expect in the day-to-day role of the principal. All of them shared that this new year is not easier because they are different challenges than the year before, however they feel more prepared to manage these new challenges.

Most of the participants shared that they have learned the importance of establishing roles and responsibilities for their staff members. They believe that this will help them do their jobs more efficiently. They have set out expectations for their front office staff so that there are not interruptions by various issues throughout the day. The principals can focus on their work and keep to their schedule because the front office understands their roles and responsibilities. They have also set out these expectations for their new assistant principals so that they do not face the same challenges as they did during their first year with lack of assistant principal support.

Most of the participants also shared that they have learned the importance of having a strong leadership team to help support their work. They have begun to realize that they must be strategic in how they support and build their leadership team. They know that time must be set aside to meet with the leadership team so that everyone remains on the same page with the same focus.

And thinking about changes to the role of principal to help reduce the stress of the job, most participants shared that they would like to see some of the responsibilities removed. Most participants felt like there is a lot of weight on them in the role of principal. The expectation is for them to wear many different hats and they are responsible for everything that happens within their building. One participant shared, "We're just so responsible for so much. It is not realistic,

but we make it happen” (Mary). Another participant shared, “I think the district should look at everything that it entails to be a principal and then take some of those responsibilities away” (Jennifer). And then one other participant said, “I think we should get paid more if this is done well. It’s a lot of work” (Kelly).

Composite Structural Description (All Participants)

This section will present a composite structural description of all five of the participants’ personal and professional experiences that have influenced their role as principal. The structural description gives deeper meaning and interpretation to the participants’ words. The structural description has been broken down into the following themes as derived from my data analysis: (1) interpersonal qualities, (2) qualities of a highly effective teacher or coach, (3) exposure during assistant principal experience, (4) weight of the principalship, (5) time management skills, (6) going it alone versus developing a team, (7) principal support, and (8) feedback and reflection.

Interpersonal Qualities

Principals in this study all possess intrapersonal qualities that showed up early in their life and have impacted their role as principal. All the participants identified themselves as an introvert when they were younger. Some of them have shifted away from being an introvert just from the nature of the roles that they hold, while some of them still struggle with being an introvert because the role of principal calls for them to step outside of that. Many introverts tend to be more comfortable focusing on their own thoughts and ideas. However, being a school principal requires you to be able to work collaboratively with your leadership team and teacher

teams. This presented a challenge for some of the participants when it came to delegating tasks out to others to manage the task load of a principal.

Three of the participants admittedly are rule followers when it comes to leading their schools. This benefits them in some ways as they feel like they are doing what is right and best for their school. However, it hinders them in some ways because they are uncomfortable with stepping outside of the box. For example, one participant followed a principal who allowed the teachers to not follow the rules when it came to implementing a specific program. So, when the participant became the principal and expected everyone to implement the program with fidelity, the staff resisted her. Her staff did not understand why she would not allow them to do it the way they had been doing it. She tried to explain to them that she does not have a track record enough to support doing things differently. Whereas one of the other participants shared that she listens to the rules, thinks through them thoroughly, and then decides what is best for her school. You can be more of a risk taker if you are not a rule follower, but there is also safety in being a rule follower.

Qualities of a Highly Effective Teacher or Coach

The principals interviewed expressed that they learned a lot through their experiences as coaches or lead teachers at their schools. Many of them learned how to work with different personalities and different skill sets of teachers. They learned about developing strong relationships to gain the buy in of those they were trying to coach. Through their coaching experience they became experts on instructional leadership. They learned how to develop explicit lesson plans with teachers, how to analyze data, and how to increase student achievement. A few of them also indicated that they learned systems for providing feedback to

teachers to move their work forward. The two principals that did not serve in an official coach position shared the same sentiment that although a coaching role would have given them even more experience, they were prepared for the instructional side of the principal role because they were able to coach teachers when they were teachers themselves. Being able to have the experience of coaching adults prior to becoming a principal allowed all the principals to feel comfortable with the role of instructional leader. Maggie shared how although she had all this knowledge on being an instructional leader, she did have difficulty using this knowledge because of the weight of all the other roles of the principalship.

Exposure During Assistant Principal Experience

All five of the participants shared their experiences as an assistant principal. Through their accounts, it was evident to see that their experience was dependent on the type of principal with which they were working. Some of them had exposure to many different roles and responsibilities that included some of the principal's roles and responsibilities, while others had limited exposure based on the tasks assigned to them. The amount of exposure the principals had during their assistant principalship experience did impact how prepared each of them felt going into their first year of the principalship. Mary seems to have had the most exposure of all the principals. She had multiple opportunities, while collaborating with her principal, to take on a variety of tasks, but she also spent her last year as an assistant principal in a building that did not have a principal. Due to this experience, Mary felt like she was already doing the work of a principal. This made it an easier transition for her going into her first year of the principalship. Two of the principals had less exposure because their principals were more hands on and liked to have their hands in all the work. These principals felt like they did not get to be part of the

decision making and this made it a little bit more challenging for them when they became a principal. Jennifer felt that she was not in charge of anything until the end of her fifth year, when she ran summer school. She enjoyed this experience and learned a lot from it, but she wishes she had that opportunity earlier on in her assistant principal experience.

Weight of the Principalship

Principals in this study all shared the phrase, “it is a lot” when describing the role of the principal. After their initial feelings of excitement over getting their first principalship the next thing they felt was this heavy weight of the position. All of them feel that the role holds a large amount of responsibility. Two of the participants described how the job impacted their health. They both ended up at the doctor's office with high blood pressure and headaches. Some of the things they would change about their role would be to see some of the responsibilities shifted. One of the participants explained how secondary principals receive additional personnel to take on some of the responsibilities, where in elementary school the responsibilities lie with the principal and the assistant principal only. If you are having challenges with your assistant principal, all the responsibility falls on the principal. Kelly also talked about the weight of carrying the emotional aspects of the job. She talked about how having an open-door policy is beneficial but at times also allows staff members to unload their stresses on you as well. One of the things that Kelly would change about the position is adding mental health support for staff so that the principal does not have to take on that role.

Time Management Skills

When thinking about the challenges of being a new principal, all the participants mentioned their struggles with time management. It was not always just time management but

prioritizing the many different tasks that a principal must accomplish in a day. A few of the principals mentioned that there is not a handbook for principals to follow on what to prioritize and what can wait. So, as a new principal who wants to do well, they felt the need to complete everything each day and this was overwhelming. The principals interviewed had some experience with time management as assistant principals but they each said that it was much different as a principal because everything fell on your desk and ended with you. The principals felt like it would be beneficial to have professional development around time management and prioritization. Experienced principals who have already worked through how to prioritize their work could lead this professional development.

Going It Alone Versus Developing a Team

Another common theme amongst the principals was a feeling of going it alone. They each became principals in buildings where a team was already in place and so they had no voice on the team members. Many of the principals interviewed had difficulties collaborating with their assistant principal. This is the one person assigned at the elementary level to support the school principal and unfortunately there is a hardship when they are unable to do the job effectively. All but one of the principals were happy to share that in the new year they have had the opportunity to either hire an assistant principal themselves or changed to a school where there is a successful assistant principal in place. They all talked about the benefits of having a dedicated team in place to help move the work of the school and to feel less of the weight of the principalship. In addition to having challenges with the assistant principal, these principals also had challenges with the team of teachers in place at the school. Some of them were working with teachers who did not want to work under their leadership and who did not follow their vision and

mission. As many of the interviewees are starting their second year, they have had an opportunity to hire their own teachers. Each of them talked about having a different feel to the new year because they have a team in place that they were able to hire. They know they will still have challenges but working with individuals who share the same values and work ethic makes their job a little bit easier.

Principal Support

When it comes to supporting the work of a new principal all the participants shared how much they enjoyed the principal boot camp that started at the beginning of their principalship. They all felt that this program had the biggest impact as far as support to their work. They each appreciated being able to collaborate with experienced principals who are willing to share their resources and their advice on being a principal in this district. They learned so much over just a few days and were looking forward to a full year where they had dedicated time set aside to meet collaboratively with each other and continue to learn from experienced principals. Unfortunately, this program came to a quick end due to the facilitator earning a promotion and no one filled the role. Through this program the principals interviewed had a mentor principal but unfortunately after the program ended there was not time for them to meet with their mentors.

The principals commented that they do have monthly principal meetings that they attend but they do not feel like these sessions support new principals. During these meetings, they often review tasks but lack specific directions on how to complete them. They all shared that they would prefer to have differentiated principal meetings each month that geared to the distinct needs of new principals. One of the participants who is going into her third year shared that she

would like to have collaborative work sessions where principals bring a problem of practice and other principals help produce solutions and next steps to solve those problems of practice.

An additional support brought up by many of the participants was visiting other schools and spending time with experienced principals. Kelly shared how she would like to visit other schools especially ones who are doing an exceptional job with student achievement. She would like the opportunity to visit the classrooms and talk to the principal about their way of work. Mary shared the same feelings about wanting to visit schools who were doing remarkable things and where she could get some takeaways to bring back to her own building. These supports are currently not in place but are ones the principals would like to see added for them.

Most of the principals shared that they feel comfortable working with their regional leadership. They said that they do feel supported, but they do wish that they received more feedback on how they can perfect their craft. The feedback that they received so far is informal and in passing. Each principal interviewed shared a need to receive specific feedback geared to the specific work they are doing in their building. Amy shared that she was able to meet with her region leadership over the summer and produce a concrete plan to look at data and helping to move students in the new year. She appreciated having someone to bounce her ideas off and someone who gave her resources. Mary shared that she was appreciative of feedback from her region leadership regarding a specific incident that had occurred in the front office. He was able to help her look at it from a different point of view and to create a plan to fix the issue.

Feedback and Reflection

All the interviewees were very reflective over their first year of the principalship. All of them were able to say that they felt more confident going into the next school year because they

were more aware of their responsibilities. One of the things mentioned by multiple participants is the realization of how important developing roles and responsibilities for others in their building are. This is especially important for the front office staff who encounter many of the parents and student situations that may cause a disruption to the school day. The principals shared how they developed roles and responsibilities that included how to manage situations when the principal is not available. Once these systems were in place, they found it easier for them to get their job done. The principals used this same approach for the assistant principals going into their second years. The principals created roles and responsibilities for the assistant principals so that they could take on more of the tasks that the principals were currently doing.

All the principals who participated in this study love the work that they are doing. They were able to talk about their challenges but also how they have been working through those challenges. They each shared how this process has helped them reflect on their first year of the principalship and how it was a fantastic way for them to get ready for the new year. It would be helpful to have systems in place where new principals have time to reflect and talk through their day-to-day work. The principals interviewed feel like this could have happened with their mentor if that program had continued. They understand the importance of reflection but cite time as the barrier.

Essence

The following is the summary of the essence of principals' experiences within their first three years and the personal and professional experiences that have influenced the role as identified by the principals who participated in the present study. In this study, new principal refers to principals who are within their first three years of the principalship. Essential

components of the experience of being a new principal were derived from finding the common experiences within the participants. The three overarching commonalities found to be the essence include professional and personal experiences, principal supports, and immense responsibility.

Professional and Personal Experiences

Principals within this study participated in university-based programs and district-based programs to become a school principal. The university programs provided the principals with general knowledge and theory regarding educational leadership. Principals describe these programs as being beneficial to the overall role of the principal. The district-based programs that they participated in gave them further insight into theories and best practices in educational leadership and helped them obtain Level II certification to become eligible for a principal position within their current county. The benefits of the district-programs were building relationships with peers from the same county, hearing from the experiences of seasoned principals, and receiving some expectations that were specific to the county they would be working for.

The principals all shared that both types of preparation programs were beneficial to their growth as a school leader. The benefit most shared from the new principals was the forming of relationships with colleagues. Through both programs, participants made connections with other soon-to-be school leaders that they now reach out to for support in their current role.

New principals shared many different experiences that have aided them in the role of principal. Some of the professional experiences are teacher, coach, and assistant principal. While some personal experiences are dealing with adversity and outside of education work experience.

All the principals began their career as classroom teachers and all of them were successful classroom teachers. As classroom teachers, they learned how to develop intentional lesson plans for students, how to read and understand data, how to use the data to drive their instruction, and how to collaborate effectively with a team. As teachers, they all experienced the benefits of being intentional about their work to see increased student achievement. Once they became successful classroom teachers, they stepped into teacher leader positions where they began to get experience working with adults.

The new principals all became coaches, whether they held the official title or coached as a lead teacher at their school. All principals felt like their coaching experience has been beneficial to their role as principal. While coaching, the new principals were able to learn curriculum development, assessment development, data collection and analysis, and team building. The coaching role supported their knowledge of being an instructional leader and how to improve student achievement in their schools. It has contributed to their knowledge of classroom observations, teacher feedback, and professional development.

The experience of assistant principal has been the most beneficial to the new principals as it is the closest to the role of principal. As assistant principals, the participants experienced a wide range of activities that have helped them prepare for the role. The experiences that each had were dependent on the principal that they served under, some given more experiences than others. All of them oversaw student discipline, scheduling, parent engagement, and safety. Most participated in instructional leadership while some having more exposure than others. It was during this time as assistant principals that the participants learned about the need for time management and balancing the instructional leadership duties with the day-to-day interruptions.

Some personal experiences that the new principals had shaped some of their interpersonal qualities. Perseverance through adversity was a common theme with participants. Some went through this adversity as children and showed through their ability to do well despite the adversity that they knew how to persevere. This quality has aided them in dealing with the challenges faced as a new principal. All the new principals talked about perseverance as they work through the daily challenges of the principalship, while keeping a positive attitude. Working in other fields prior to going into education was another personal experience shared by the candidates. Working at banks, tutoring companies, personal assistant, and restaurant work all gave them additional skills to bring into the principalship. These jobs helped them learn that hard work pays off and how to multi-task when there are many different things on their plate.

These professional and personal experiences shared by participants all worked together to give them skills and expertise in some of the areas needed in the role of principal. The on-the-job training is the most beneficial training that the principals received in preparing them for their current role.

Supports

Being a new principal also means that you will need support. Support comes in different ways. The participants shared that they receive regional support and district support, support from colleagues, support from mentors, and support from their school-based teams.

All principals report to a region superintendent and executive director in this district. This person supervises the new principal and serves as a support. Most of the participants shared that they are comfortable with their regional support and reach out to them frequently for any questions or advice they may need. The regional support comes out to the school frequently,

walks with the principals, and shares informal feedback with them. The principals also receive support from various district offices. Sometimes it is difficult for the new principals to know who to reach out to with specific questions or problems. This adds additional stress to the new principals as they try to get their questions answered. Principals felt that their questions went to multiple departments without anyone really helping them. So, although the district offices are there to support, there is a need for more communication regarding what each department oversees.

The new principals shared that they reach out most frequently to their colleagues when they need support. They have created small principal groups where they feel comfortable asking questions about things they might should already know the answer to. They feel this is a safe space where they will not feel judged for not knowing something. Sometimes the issue may be that nobody in the group knows the answer and that is usually when they will reach out to regional support.

The new principals had a mentor in at least the first year of the principalship. The mentors and mentees did not meet on a consistent basis and the hectic aspects of the job made it difficult to meet at all. District staff assigned the mentors, and there was a plan to meet, but there was no follow-through. Only a few of the new principals felt supported by a mentor.

All the new principals had challenges with support from their school team during the first year of the principalship. When going into a school new and inheriting a team that is already in place, most principals had challenges. In almost all cases, the assistant principal of the school was not strong, and the principals felt like they had to do a lot of the work alone. Experiencing this during year one, made the job difficult, but it also taught them the importance of building a

strong team around them. During year two, all participants put a focus on developing this strong team. They have made changes in staff and have learned the importance of delegation and letting some things go. Although it was challenging, they each learned an important lesson.

Immense Responsibility

Principals within this study believed strongly that they carry an immense responsibility in their role. The role of principal fell into the following categories: instructional leadership, student achievement, organizational leadership, parent and community engagement, and professional and ethical behavior of adults. Of these categories, the three that carry a lot of weight for new principals are instructional leadership, student achievement, and organizational leadership.

Instructional leadership is an important role of a school principal. Principals expressed the importance of having the knowledge to appropriately observe classroom instruction, provide explicit feedback to teachers, and to be able to provide the professional development needed to move instructional practices forward in their building. Although the principals have experiences that have provided them with this knowledge, a challenge of the principalship is holding this role as sacred. The new principals expressed that there are many different distractions that occur in the school day that can take you away from this important role. The principals stressed the need to set up dedicated time to meet with teachers and to be in classrooms. They need to make sure that while doing so, they are adhering to the teacher contract and following all guidelines. The principals do not have official coaching staff to assist them with this process in a year where there is new benchmarks and new curriculum. This places a large responsibility on principals while they try to juggle their other roles.

Student achievement is another important responsibility of principals. The participants are all in schools with high poverty rates and student achievement tends to go up and down each year. There is a lot of pressure on the principals to increase student achievement each year. This is sometimes difficult given staffing issues, experience levels of teachers, attendance issues with students, and new leadership. The new principals shared that student achievement is always at the forefront of their decision making and it adds another layer of responsibility and weight to the position.

Finally, the new principals all shared that under organizational leadership, safety is their number one concern. There is a tremendous weight on principals when it comes to making sure all students and staff under their care remain safe. This is an area that the principals do not feel they are properly trained for. It is not something in their preparation programs and the district assumes that the principals already know what to do regarding safety. Safety involves simple things like making sure the car rider line and the walker line do not intersect, having a smooth cafeteria procedure, and appropriately monitoring during recess. It also involves much larger things like making sure students and staff know what to do in case of an active shooter, making sure the appropriate person picks up students, and knowing how to deescalate angry students and parents. All these things are important to the safety of students and staff and place a great deal of responsibility on the new principals.

The weight of the principalship is heavy for all the new principals. Understanding how to deal with this weight in healthy ways is a challenge. The medical well-being of new principals is a concern when adding this weight of responsibility. Stress levels are high, and principals experienced illnesses that they did not have before the position of principal. This weight of

responsibility does not seem to decrease in years two and three, but the principals develop strategies for managing the weight. This ties back to the building of strong school teams and support systems for the principals.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study sought to expand the research base regarding the experiences of new principals and the personal and professional experiences that influence the role. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do new principals (years 1-3) experience the principalship?
2. What personal and professional experiences have influenced the role of the principalship?

The principals included in the study were all within their first three years of their principalship, worked in a Title I school, and worked for the same large, urban district in Northeast Florida. Each of these principals began their careers as classroom teachers, moved into leadership positions as assistant principals, and promoted to principal within the same district. Despite the similarities in their experiences, the principals varied in their upbringing, experiences with diversity, their initial major selections in college, and in their exposure to leadership tasks as assistant principals. This chapter reviews the results of the study and provides connections of the results to prior findings concerning new principals and their experiences. After presenting the findings, a discussion of the limitations of the study follows. The chapter concludes with a review of the implications of the findings for both research and practice.

Key Findings

The results of the phenomenological analysis indicate that the participants discussed three essential elements of their experiences in being a new principal: professional and personal experiences, supports, and a feeling of immense responsibility. Each participants' responses

varied due to their individual circumstances. All the participants shared in their enjoyment of being a new principal regardless of the struggles and challenges. Furthermore, they all look forward to the next school year where they can make changes based on lessons learned.

Professional and Personal Experiences

Only some of the participants majored in education for their bachelor's degree, while all the participants earned their master's degree in educational leadership. When reflecting on the experiences of participating in the university preparation programs, the participants could not think of specific things they learned that have aided them in their current role as principal. They all stated that the experience was positive and that they learned more theory than practical application. The most memorable experiences were those where they were able to shadow a current administrator for a period. One participant was able to shadow for a full year, while the others only shadowed for a small amount of time. Those that only had a week or two weeks of shadowing experience would have liked to have had more.

All the participants participated in district level preparation programs. Most participated in the Aspiring Leaders program to become an assistant principal, and all completed the Rising Leaders program to earn their Level II certification to become a principal. The new principals found these programs to be valuable, but again could not list many specific experiences from those programs that have aided them in the role of principal. One common thing that most referred to was learning about having a broader perspective about education. They read articles and books about the wonderful things other states and countries are doing around increasing student achievement. The other positive experience from the district led preparation programs was the development of relationships. It was during this time that many of the new principals

met new friends and colleagues who continue to support them today. The new principals felt that the district led programs dealt a lot with theory as well and not so much on application. The only time they recalled learning specifically about how to apply their learning to the roles of assistant principal and principal were when they heard from guest speakers who were currently working as principals in the district. The guest speakers were able to share real-world experiences and talk to the participants about how they worked through different challenges of the role of principal. All the participants mentioned that they would have liked to have heard from more guest speakers. The district led programs also had shadowing experiences embedded. The participants valued these experiences but did not feel like it was enough. A few mentioned that even as they were preparing to become assistant principals, they shadowed principals. They would have preferred to be shadowing assistant principals, so that they could learn that role first.

The new principals in this study all started their career as classroom teachers. Some served as a teacher for only three years before moving into coaching, while others taught for ten or more years. All the new principals could remember specific experiences as teachers that have helped them in their leadership role. As teachers, they learned the importance of lesson planning and curriculum development. They learned to understand data and how to plan differentiated instruction to meet the needs of their students. They shared how they became great teachers through collaborating with strong coaches and supportive administration. Each of the participants saw success as classroom teachers through high student achievement scores and by becoming teacher leaders in their schools. All the participants served as grade level chairs, mentors to new teachers, and heads of committees.

Three out of five of the new principals moved from teacher to an official coach position. While the other two did not hold coach positions, however, they were coaching adults in their buildings as teacher leaders. The experience of coaching adults has helped all the participants in their current role as principal. The principals talked about building strong teams of teachers while they were coaches. They did this though developing relationships and trust with their teacher teams. They set goals with the teachers and then provided professional development to help the teachers meet those goals. Through professional development, they worked on curriculum development, lesson planning, data analysis, and classroom management. Another thing that they developed through coaching was how to work through challenges and push back from adults. Many spoke about the need to build buy-in to get their teacher teams to make the changes needed to impact student outcomes. Some of the participants shared that they also learned how to have hard conversations with adults through their experience as coach. The two participants that did not hold official coach positions officially felt they learned a lot as teacher leaders, but also shared they may have grown more if they had held the role as coach prior to going into administration.

For all participants, the experience of being an assistant principal has helped them the most in understanding the role of principal. The participants pointed out multiple times that in the current district there is not a roles and responsibilities manual for assistant principals. Because there is not a manual for them or for their principals who supervise them, the participants had varied experiences as assistant principals. Some of the common experiences they had were dealing with student discipline, serving as testing coordinator, planning parent involvement activities, meeting with disgruntled parents, observing and evaluating staff, and

participating in common planning sessions. All these responsibilities continue into the principalship and therefore gave them wonderful experience. A common complaint by most of them was that although they had all these responsibilities, there was not a handbook on how to do them. They each talked about limited professional development as assistant principals and that they had to find out how to do things mostly on their own or by asking their principal. All the participants shared that they did not participate in budgeting as an assistant principal and that they were not fully engaged in decision-making as an assistant principal. In most cases, their principal would make the decisions and then explain to them why they made the decisions. For all five new principals, none of them felt that anyone was purposefully preparing them to be a principal. They had incredibly supportive principals but felt that they mostly just oversaw the tasks of an assistant principal. One of the new principals described that she had a lot more experiences than most other assistant principals she knew. She said that she had to be initiative-taking to put herself into those experiences, but she wanted to be well-prepared as a principal. She even had the opportunity to run a school as an assistant principal with no principal on site. This experience prepared her well for her first year as a principal.

The new principals all shared some intrapersonal qualities that have influenced them in the role of principal. These qualities emerged for most of them as young children and have stayed with them into the role of principal. Perseverance is the first quality that they share. A few of them had adversity in their home life as children. Through this adversity, they were still able to go to school and excel in their studies. Another did not do well during her first year of college due to some challenges. She persevered, came back to college, and did excellent. And another candidate moved from a small town with little diversity to a large city with a lot of diversity. She

struggled her first year but persevered and ended up flourishing in her new environment. All the new principals still have this perseverance as they work through the challenges of being a new principal. They see their challenges as growth opportunities and continue to amend work through the challenges. They are all goal setters who want to continuously improve their craft.

Supports

The principals in this study all shared multiple avenues for gaining support in their new roles. These supports consist of district support, region leadership support, support from colleagues, support through mentorship programs, and support from their school-based teams.

Overall, the participants feel that the district office is helpful to them. Many of the principals were able to recount instances where they reached out to different district offices to gain information about something that was due or something that they needed further direction on. The principals stated a few times that it is sometimes difficult to know who exactly to reach out to at the district office. Another sentiment shared was that it was sometimes frustrating because their email would bounce around to different departments without anyone really answering their question. Another area where new principals gain the support of the district is through professional development. Professional development for principals typically occurs during monthly principal meetings. A shared sentiment from the participants was that the principal meetings do not feel beneficial. The participants feel that they learn about specific tasks, but there is not enough discussion around how to get the tasks done. They all talked about the desire to have differentiated meetings where discussion would focus on the needs of new principals. They also shared a desire to participate in problem-solving sessions where they could

bring a particular problem to the table and experienced principals could share thoughts and ideas on resolving the problems.

Another source of support for new principals mentioned in this study was region leadership support. All the principals in this county belong to a particular region and supervised by a region superintendent. The region superintendent comes out to the school to visit and walk classrooms. They also are available to answer any questions the new principals may have. Most of the participants in this study felt that their region person was supportive and provided a safe space for them to ask questions. A few of the participants did not feel this way and were uncomfortable and cautious about reaching out to region leadership. In these cases, the principals felt as though there was a judgement made every time they asked a question. Most of the principals shared that they do not receive regular, specific feedback from their supervisor, and all would like to have this type of feedback to improve their craft.

Most participants responded that they reach out to their colleagues when they are unsure of a task or responsibility. Within their regions, they have formed bonds with other principals who are supportive in helping new principals. A few commented that it makes them feel better when they reach out and realize that even their colleagues do not have the answer. It makes them feel not so alone. A few of the new principals commented that they wished there were more team building activities done in the district so that they could expand their friend circle and have more principals to reach out to for support.

When asked about support for new principals, all the participants commented on a New Principal Boot Camp that was began in the summer prior to their first year. This boot camp was beneficial to the new principals because it gave them connections to experienced principals,

provided them with lots of resources, and provided another safe space to ask their questions. The program was supposed to go for two years and provide monthly meetings for all the new principals. Unfortunately, the facilitator of the program took another position, and no one picked up the program. It lasted for just that summer. Based on the participants shared experiences with the program, it was highly beneficial in a brief period. When asked further about any other mentor experiences, the participants shared that they had a mentor, but there was no follow-up and no designated time to meet, so there were no real connections.

A final level of support that new principals receive is support through their school-based teams. When assigned to a new building, most of the new principals inherited the leadership team at the school. This means that they did not select their assistant principal or their coaches who would help lead the work with them. This caused a major challenge for most of the new principals in this study. As new principals face many different tasks and roles, they look to their school leadership team to help them and to delegate tasks to them. Many of the new principals in this study had assistant principals that they were not able to count on during their first year for many varied reasons. They described a feeling of being alone and having to do all the work themselves. After experiencing this during their first year, many of them worked to be able to select and build their own team in year two. The new principals who were able to hire new team members are already feeling the difference. They described having people who were more aligned with their vision and who were ready and able to take on various tasks at the school.

Overall, the new principals in this study felt they have multiple avenues for gaining support as a new principal. The supports most frequently cited by the new principals were

colleagues and school-based teams because they know more about what is happening at the school level.

Immense Responsibility

Finally, one of the themes that arose throughout the study was a feeling of immense responsibility being in the principal role. As assistant principals, each of the participants thought that they knew the expectations of being a principal and were ready to meet those expectations. Each of them, once appointed, found that there was much more for them to learn about the role. Each of them described the job saying, “it is a lot.” This phrase repeated over and over in the interviews. For some principals, it was so much that there was an impact on their health. They had high stress levels, high blood pressure, and difficulty sleeping.

When asked where the stress levels came from most, they cited three distinct roles of the principalship that caused stress: instructional leadership, student achievement, and organizational leadership. First was instructional leadership. Although many of the participants had multiple experiences with leading common planning sessions, observing classrooms, and providing feedback around instruction, they had support while doing so. As a principal, on a team that you are not confident in, the weight of doing this all on your own while still managing the many other things that occur in a day of the principal was overwhelming for some. Next was increasing student achievement. All the principals in this study work at challenging, high poverty schools with high expectations of either maintaining or increasing student achievement. There were pressures from the state and the district around their school grade. Finally, organizational leadership also caused a lot of stress for the new principals. Specifically, the participants mentioned maintaining the school schedule, managing their day, and ensuring safety. All the

participants commented on the importance of having a sound school schedule, but for many it took trial and error to get to one that worked for them. The constant need to change schedules due to a multitude of issues caused stress on the principals. The principal's personal schedule was also a concern as they were struggling with prioritizing the many different daily tasks. As a new principal, they felt that they had to get everything done by the end of the day and it was just not possible. This is something that has improved for them after their first year. Finally, a heavy weight of the principalship is safety. All the participants commented on the weight of responsibility related to the safety of all students and staff under their care. They all recognize this as a priority and feel that more training would be beneficial in this area. Along with safety drills, safety on the playground, and safety in the cafeteria, several of the participants commented on the safety around mental health. Their students and staff are carrying a lot of emotional and physical issues with them into the school. The principal is privy to a lot of this information and wants to help, but they do not have the proper training to help support in these areas. This adds to the weight of the principalship.

Connections to Existing Literature

This study has similarities and differences with previous research findings on the experiences of new principals. This study supports the work of Davis & Leon (2011) and Orr (2011) about the importance of blending coursework for principal preparation programs with intensive field experiences. The participants in this study all shared that their principal preparation programs were helpful but lacked the direct application piece needed for them to feel successful as new principals. They recalled learning different concepts that are related to the position of principal, but they did not recall the opportunity to apply that knowledge. There was

an opportunity for a part-time internship experience for most of the participants, which aligns to the research by Davis & Darling-Hammond (2012) and Orr & Orphanos (2011) on the importance of quality internship experiences that give participants a glimpse into the day-to-day-work of a school principal. A few of the participants commented that although they had an internship experience, they still felt like they were unprepared for what the actual role of principal was like. The participants all agreed that more time with a sitting principal would have been beneficial, and they would like to have had more responsibility during the internship experience.

Principals in this study had various levels of preparedness for the principal role based on their assistant principal experience. Those who had more responsibilities during their assistant principal experience felt more prepared for the principal role. This is consistent with the research by Bastian & Henry (2015) who found that the experiences during the assistant principal years impacted the effectiveness of new principals. All the participants in this study agreed that they did not feel anyone coached or trained them to become principals during their assistant principal years. This goes against the research by Barnett et al. (2012), Hausman et al. (2001), and Shoho & Barnett (2010) who all found the assistant principal role should be the training ground for future principals. All the new principals in this study were “homegrown” in that they were all assistant principals in the same district that they became principals. As Bastian & Henry (2015) found, districts can capitalize on assistant principals’ time to ensure they learn the competencies needed to be successful principals in their district.

This study supports the work of Chiang et al. (2020) which found that professional development for new principals is spotty at best. The participants in this study shared feelings of

disappointment around their professional development as a new principal. Many of them participated in a new principal boot camp designed to put experienced principals in front of them to share their resources and best practices. The program only lasted a few months, and the new principals were disappointed. They also shared that their monthly professional development sessions at principals' meetings are not beneficial to them or designed with the needs of new principals in mind. This aligns with the research of Alvoid & Black (2014) who found that differentiated professional development is necessary for principals to develop and grow. Problem solving should be the focus of professional development. Problem solving is an area that the new principals in this study want more time for in their professional development sessions.

Specifically, they would like to bring current problems in their building and be able to talk to other principals who have great strategies for dealing with those problems. An example could be a problem around finding the time to meet with all teachers during common planning time because there are not enough resource teachers to watch all students. Principals who have found a solution to this problem could present and answer questions regarding their approach.

Casavant & Cherkowski (2001), Grissom & Harrington (2010), and Parylo et al. (2012) found that new principals report mentoring as the most beneficial and useful support received. This contrasts with what the participants of this study reported. Each principal had a mentor, but they reported that they did not find the time to connect with them very often. When asked where they turn to for support, all the principals in the study responded with their peers rather than their mentor. They were able to name their mentor and claimed a positive relationship with them, but they were not their main support structure. Bauer & Silver (2017) and Parylo et al. (2012) found that participating in a mentorship program reduces the feelings of isolation for new principals.

This is also in contrast to how the participants in this study felt. Although they are all part of a mentorship program, most shared their feelings about feeling alone in the work.

Most of new principals in this study all struggled with building a school team to support them in their work during their first few years. This caused the new principals to feel like they could not delegate tasks out to others and therefore felt the stress and responsibility of doing things alone. This is congruent with the studies of Alvoid & Black (2014), Costello (2015), and Gentilucci et al. (2013) who all found that shared instructional leadership can help reduce the amount of stress on the principal. By delegating out tasks such as leading math common planning, reading common planning, or classroom observations and feedback, the principals themselves would not feel as if they had to do everything themselves. The principal could pick a specific area or grade level for them to focus on. In the current study, the participants learned the importance of building the school team and were able to begin that work by years two and three, but it did cause them much stress during their first year in trying to do all things themselves.

This study supports the work of Anderson & Turnbull (2016), Leithwood & Jantzi (2008), and Tingle (2019) regarding the impact of a principal supervisor. They found in their research that principal supervisors can be more of a support than a supervisor when they provide opportunities to meet in small groups and work on instructional leadership. Most of the new principals in this study found this to be true as well. They found their principal supervisors to be supportive and available whenever they needed someone to bounce ideas off. They felt their supervisor came often enough to understand the work that was happening in their building so that they could support them in many ways. Principal supervisors should take on the

responsibility of coaching and mentoring new principals to help them develop the knowledge and skills necessary to becoming an effective principal.

There were many connections with the literature around the challenges of new principals and the challenges of the new principals in this study. Principals in this study shared that they were surprised and stressed by the multitude of roles and responsibilities of new principals. This is congruent with the works of Bauer & Brazer (2013), Manna (2015), Oplatka, (2012), and Shoho & Barnett (2010) who all found that new principals were surprised and overwhelmed by the role demands and work overload of being a principal. Some of this surprise is due to the constantly changing role of the principal, and the addition of new roles without the removal of old ones. There is a difference for the participants feelings of this changing role and the research by Bauer & Brazer (2013) and New Leaders (2013). The research found that the changing role of the principal could lead to job dissatisfaction in the early years. This was not the case for the new principals in this study. They all felt a sense of job satisfaction even through their struggles and challenges.

Participants in this study shared feelings of isolation while on the job. This aligns to the research done by Bauer & Brazer (2013) and Stephenson & Bauer (2010). This isolation comes from the knowledge that the success of the school relies on the principal. They feel this pressure and try to do many things themselves instead of delegating or trusting others. Many of the new principals in this study felt that they could not rely on their assistant principals or their leadership team members during their first few years. Much of this had to do with the fact that they inherited the leadership team instead of being able to hire their own people. It took time and work building trust before they could start delegating out tasks. They still have feelings of “doing

it alone” but they are getting better at delegating. The idea of delegating is important in the work of a school principal because there are so many different tasks that they need to accomplish. In alignment with the research by Gentilucci et al. (2013) and New Teacher Center (2018), the participants shared that one of their biggest challenges is time management. The new principals in this study shared that it is not just time management, but the prioritization of the daily tasks that come at them. They struggle a bit with knowing which things are a priority and which things can wait.

When it comes to instructional leadership, Alvoid & Black (2014), Costello (2015), and Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) found that new principals are finding they are not prepared to take on the role of instructional leadership. This contrasts with what the new principals in this study shared. They all felt well prepared to take on the role of instructional leadership. They even said it was one of the easiest parts of their new position and a part they loved the most. They felt they were prepared for this work through their work as teachers, coaches, and assistant principals. The district they work in has a high focus on instruction and therefore the new principals had many opportunities to engage in the work of curriculum development, lesson planning, data analysis, classroom observation, and professional development prior to becoming a principal.

This study supports the work of Alvoid and Black (2014) where they found that safety in schools has added another layer of responsibility and challenge to the role of the principal. The participants shared that safety is their number one priority in their buildings. They understand that it is their responsibility to ensure the safety of all students and staff in the building and they must follow all safety protocols regardless of how others may feel about those protocols. The

new principals shared that safety is an added area of stress and that they would like more professional development in this area. Specifically, they would like training in their own building because every building is different, and they want to ensure they are following all protocols correctly.

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. This investigation provides new principals' perspectives on how they experience the role of principal and on the prior experiences that have influenced them in the role. It provides a strong picture of the substantial number of responsibilities that make up the role of principal in our current schools and the need for consistent, individualized support for our new principals.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that may have the potential to influence the validity of the findings. These limitations include the following: (a) the selected qualitative methodology and the analysis procedure utilized; (b) the selection of participants; and (c) the type of school and district that the new principals work in.

Limitations of Phenomenology

There are limitations within the current study that come with using phenomenology as the methodology. Within phenomenology, the goal is to focus on the commonalities of a particular group, in this case new principals. Finding the commonalities comes from a process of reduction during data analysis. Through reduction, there is a loss of individual experiences and perspectives of the participants. This impacts the generalizability of the findings. The perception presented in this study is of five new principals who work in the same school district. However,

within their commonalities they each bring diverse experiences and ideas to the perception of being a new principal.

Participants

In designing this study, I anticipated I would have some difficulty in identifying enough participants because I currently am a supervisor of principals in this district and wanted to work with principals who I did not supervise. I also wanted to select participants who worked in the same types of schools in the district and wanted to select principals who were within their first three years of the principalship, which limited my pool. I ended up reaching out to six new principals in regions other than my own and five agreed to the study.

All the new principals who agreed to the study were female principals. This may also limit the study to specifically how new female principals experience the role of principal. This small, homogenous sample for this qualitative study allowed for the in-depth collection of information from the participants; however, a larger participant sample would allow for a deeper analysis. Although the participants were similar in where they are right now in their career, they each had differences in the number of years they have been in education. These new principals may have had differences in their perspectives on their experiences due to the range of time spent in education. The reduction process used in phenomenology reduced these differences since the findings presented were similar across all participants, regardless of their years of experience in education.

Type of School and District

All the new principals work in the same school district, work at Title I schools, and had a school grade of a “C” on the Florida school grade system within their first three years. These

principals may experience challenges that would be vastly different from those challenges at a non-Title I school, or a school rated other than a “C” on the Florida school grade system. The principals in this study may also experience the role of principal differently than new principals who work in different counties in Florida and in different states. Another limitation related to being in the same district is that all the participants know me as a principal supervisor within their district. This knowledge may create responses from the participants that are more guarded than if I was not a supervisor within their district.

Implications for Research

The present study sheds light on new principals and their experiences that helped shape their role. Further research is necessary to encompass a diverse group of new principals. Little research has compared male principals and female principals’ experiences as a new principal. Future research should compare female principals’ experiences as a new principal with that of male new principals to account for any differences between the two. To increase the breadth of the research on new principals and their experiences, future research studies should include larger sample sizes, principals from multiple districts and states, and principals from diverse types of schools (non-Title I, schools with ratings other than “C,” middle schools, or high schools).

Interviews were the primary data source for collecting information in this study on the experiences of new principals. Future research in this area may explore different data collection sources to capture the variety of experiences of new principals. Observations of the day-to-day work of a new principal could be beneficial by allowing the researcher to directly observe the new principals’ behaviors and interactions. These observations could help the researcher confirm

or refute the assertions made by the participants. Various data collection methods such as observations, interviews, and document analysis can foster stronger trustworthiness in the study (Stahl & King, 2020).

This study adds to the research on how the assistant principal experience can influence the preparedness of school principals. Bastian & Henry (2015) found that where the new principals serve as assistant principal and the experiences they encountered during that time influences the effectiveness of new principals. The findings of this study support this in that each of the participants shared different experiences as assistant principals even though they worked in the same district. Previous research also found that the assistant principal role should be the training ground for future principals and therefore assistant principals should have challenging assignments that prepare them for the role of principal (Barnett et al., 2012; Hausman et al., 2001; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). The participants of this study shared that they did not feel as if there was intentional training for the role of principal while they were an assistant principal. Future research should include opportunities to learn from experienced principals and how they work to prepare their assistant principals for the future role of principal. Future research could also include assistant principals specifically chosen because they received intentional training to become a principal during their assistant principal years to explore this training program to determine if it made an impact on their success as a new principal.

Another area for future research is support for new principals through their principal supervisor. Honig (2012) stated that the position of principal supervisor should be that of principal support and teaching by “working with small groups of principals individually and in networks to develop their capacity for instructional leadership” (p. 734). The principals in this

study felt supported by their principal supervisors for the most part but could not give specifics. The support was usually walking classrooms with them or being available for questions when needed. Future research should look at systematic support approaches used by principal supervisors to impact the success of a new principal. It could also include systems for developing a trusting relationship where principal supervisors create a safe space for principals.

Findings from this study support the work of Chiang et al. (2020) in that principal professional development is spotty at best. The participants all shared that the professional development that they receive is not beneficial to their needs. They reported receiving training on what to do, but now how to do various tasks and responsibilities assigned to their role. Work by Alvoid & Black (2014) and Duncan et al. (2011) recommended that professional development for new principals center around working with difficult staff members, working with difficult parents, instructional leadership, using data to inform decisions, school budget and finance, creating a collegial faculty, working with difficult students, and legal issues. Future research should analyze the types of professional development new principals receive to see if it aligns with these recommendations. Exploring various systematic approaches to principal professional development, such as action research, job-embedded professional development, and professional learning communities would benefit districts in the future.

In this study, new principals reported that they received little to no specific feedback on their work, even within the evaluation process used in their district. They also shared how much they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their journey through the interview process in this study. Future research should evaluate how new principals receive feedback and from whom. It would also evaluate whether the feedback given was beneficial in that it changed principal

practice in a positive way. Future research could also analyze reflection and the impact it could have on the work of a new principal.

Implications for Practice

Previous data reported that fifty percent of new principals quit during their third year in the role (New Teacher Center, 2018). The current study and previous research suggest that the role of the principal is constantly changing, and as new roles are added, few are taken away (Augustine-Shaw et al., 2017; Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Manna, 2015). This leads to a multitude of challenges for new principals. Knowing this information, school districts and college preparation programs could implement strategies to reduce the challenges of new principals and to reduce the principal turnover rate. Strategies that focus on preparation, professional development, and supports could help reduce those challenges.

School districts and college preparation programs are responsible for preparing school leaders. Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) found that high quality principal preparation programs and professional development are associated with positive principal outcomes, especially towards their feelings of preparedness. They also found that there was plenty of in-service type professional development for principals, but the internships, applied learning, and mentoring is lacking. Participants in this study all shared that their preparation programs were beneficial; however, they could not cite specific things that they learned and are now applying in the field. Most of the participants shared that the preparation programs were more theory and textbook based instead of hands on and application work. Although all the participants shared that they had some internship experiences during their preparation programs, it was the one thing they all

wish they had more of. Browne-Ferrigno & Muth (2006) and Duncan et al. (2011) found that these internship experiences give aspiring leaders a glimpse into the day-to-day experiences of a principal. The participants in this study found that they were surprised by the day-to-day behaviors and interactions of a principal. They would not have been so surprised if they were able to spend a longer period shadowing experienced principals during their preparation programs. College and district preparation programs should allot more time to the practical application of coursework during longer internship experiences for their students. Individual districts would benefit from developing a preparation program that focuses specifically on the practical aspects of the assistant principal and principal roles in their county.

Another area of preparation for new principals is the work they do through their assistant principal experience. Again, through the work of Barnett et al. (2012), Hausman et al. (2001), and Shoho & Barnett (2010) the role of assistant principal should serve as the training ground for future principals. The principals in this study did not feel as though there was intentional training to become principals when they were assistant principals and they all shared different experiences as assistant principals. Some of the participants did much of the same work as the principal, while others only performed tasks and responsibilities of an assistant principal. School districts should create systematic procedures to develop assistant principals into future principals. This should include specific experiences that assistant principals should be a part of while still performing their assistant principal duties. The school district should create a timeline of experiences that a principal should follow in preparing their assistant principal for the principal role. This timeline and procedure should provide opportunity for feedback and reflection. It

should also give them opportunity to shadow other principals during their time as assistant principals.

When it comes to professional development, Anderson & Turnbull (2016) and Honig (2012) found that districts who are doing professional development for principals well are ensuring that the training is ongoing and intensive and providing job-embedded training where needed. Alvoid & Black (2014) found that the differentiated professional development helps meet the diverse needs of the individual principal. The participants in this study shared that their main source of professional development is through monthly principal meetings. The meetings focus on task completion by the principals and new initiatives from the district. They shared that the trainings are more on what to do and not how to do them. The trainings lack differentiation based on the needs of the individual principals. Districts should create differentiated professional development opportunities for their principals. The new principals in this study would like to see problem-solving sessions focused on areas of concerns that they are having in their building. They would like to have experienced principals share strategies on how to overcome some of the issues new principals are having in their buildings. Districts could survey principals to determine individual needs and to find who has strengths in certain areas where they may assist other principals who need to develop in those areas.

When assistant principals become principals there is an assumption that they fully understand the roles and responsibilities. This is not the case for the participants in this study who shared that they were surprised by the number of tasks and responsibilities. They shared that task management and prioritization were challenging for them. The principals in this study also shared that there is not a handbook for assistant principals or principals. Many of them keep a

notebook and calendar to keep up with all the responsibilities for those two roles. When stepping into the roles, the new principals shared that they did a lot of reaching out to other schools or to district offices to find out exactly how to do various parts of the job. Districts should create a handbook for the role of assistant principal and principal so that there are standard procedures in place for the routine work of these administrators. Districts should also create a yearly calendar of items that are due each year for those two roles. Having these procedures in place will help reduce stress on the administrators and help them with time management and meeting deadlines.

A final area of professional development that is critical to the growth of new principals is feedback and reflection. Goff et al. (2015) found that by engaging principals in reflection and helping them interpret feedback led to enhanced overall leadership ability. The new principals in this study shared that they receive most of their feedback in passing or very informally. It is usually feedback over a particular thing they did or on a specific situation that occurred.

Participants crave feedback that will help them develop into expert principals and improve their way of work. Districts can create structures to provide formal feedback to their new principals through use of the principal supervisors. Organizing specific dates to sit down and provide feedback throughout the year is critical to the development of new principals. To give feedback, principal supervisors must be aware of what is happening in the school so that they can give specific feedback to the principal on things they observed them doing. The participants in this study were also interested in being able to provide feedback on their principal supervisors. To accomplish this, districts could develop a system for 360 feedback for all employees. 360 degree is a process by which employees would receive feedback from all of those around them including peers, supervisors, colleagues, self-evaluation, and subordinates. Feedback does not

just fall on the shoulders of principal supervisors. New principals should also implement structures for getting feedback from their constituents but may need some guidance on how to do this. Some beneficial structures are one to one meetings with teachers, students, or parents, focus groups on certain hot topics in the building, or surveys sent out to various constituent groups. The principals in this study enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on their time as principals so far. Districts can replicate this by offering times of reflection during principal meetings with specific questions asked and differentiated to the experience level of the principals. If there is a mentorship program in place, these meeting times would also be a suitable time to allow reflection time for the new principals.

Prior research has made it evident that new principals must receive adequate support during the first few years of the principalship to be most successful (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Mendels & Mitang, 2013; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). One area of support for new principals would be participating in a mentorship program. In previous research, new principals report mentoring as the most useful and beneficial support received (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Parylo et al., 2012). The new principals in this study had the opportunity to begin in a mentorship program but the program was short lived. The participants shared that they learned so much in the brief time that they participated in the program. They had the opportunity to partner with a mentor and hear from and gather resources from experienced principals throughout the district. Districts should create a solid system for a mentoring program that allows for consistent mentorship opportunities for at least the first two years of the principalship. This support system allows the new principals to form a networking group, gather resources, and have a safe space to share their challenges.

Another area of support for new principals comes from the district. The new principals in this study shared a common feeling of frustration when trying to determine who to contact within the district to resolve certain issues at the school level. Districts would reduce the frustration of new principals if they were to create a streamlined form of communication between the district and the schools. Districts should create a handbook to include which offices oversee which areas and who the best contact is for that department. Sometimes time is of the essence when principals are trying to resolve issues and so also giving them contact information for those who can help them with those emergencies would be beneficial. One of the common themes that came out of the study is the immense amount of responsibility that a new principal feels in their role. When asked what they would like to see changed, the new principals shared that they would like to see some of the responsibilities removed from their plate. Districts can support principals by doing a yearly analysis of the responsibilities placed on their principals to see if they can shift or eliminate some of those responsibilities. This would aid in the overall satisfaction and health of their school principals.

When it comes to principal supervisors, the new principals need to feel safe to ask questions of their supervisors without it feeling evaluative. Districts can collaborate with principal supervisors on how to create safe spaces for their principals and how to provide them with support needed for them to be successful. Principal supervisors see the new principals more often than district leadership and therefore can help in determining the best professional development for each principal based on their needs. Small group differentiated professional development provided by the principal supervisors outside of the monthly principal meetings could be beneficial. The principal supervisors can also talk with the new principals about their

goals and aspirations for the future so that they may help promote them and get them the support needed to meet their goals.

One final area of support for new principals is the power of having a strong school-based team. Many of the new principals in this study had a challenging first year because they did not have a strong school-based team. Shared instructional leadership can help reduce the pressure felt by a new principal (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Costello, 2015; Gentilucci et al., 2013). Districts can support new principals with this by either providing professional development on how to build those teams or by allowing new principals to hire their own teams. This would include the assistant principal and academic coaches who assist the work of the principal. Helping new principals to create strong building teams will allow them to feel more confident in delegating out tasks so that they do not feel like they are bearing all the weight at the school and will help them not feel like they are working in isolation.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore how new principals experience the role of principal and to uncover what personal and professional experiences influenced the role for five new principals in a northeast Florida school district. Findings suggest that new principals in this study have similar experiences of preparation programs, teaching, coaching and assistant principalship that have all influenced how they are experiencing the role of principal. They also share similar support systems such as mentors, peers, region leadership, and school-based teams who have also shaped how they have experienced the role of principal. Finally, all the new principals in this study shared a similar feeling of immense responsibility in the role of principalship. The findings in this study are beneficial to the development of programs designed

to support the development of future and current principals so that districts can ensure they have effective principals at all their schools and mitigate high principal turnover.

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Appendix A-Recruitment Letter

To Potential Participant in New Principal Research:

My name is Marianne Simon. I am a doctoral student at the University of North Florida in the Educational Leadership Department. The purpose of this letter is to ask you to participate in a study of the experiences of new principals. If you choose to participate in this study, you will complete a survey and three in-depth interviews regarding your experiences as a new principal and your perceptions of those experiences. Please contact Marianne Simon at N00016972@unf.edu or call 904-234-4715 if you are interested in participating. I, Marianne Simon, am looking for between 5-6 new principals who will agree to be interviewed and review the study data. The process will take about six months to complete, with most of the interview time done during the summer months. I, Marianne Simon, am asking for you to:

1. To complete a survey prior to being selected as a participant in the study. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey, you MAY be selected to participate in a series of three interviews. If you are not selected, your responses to the survey questions will be destroyed and you will not participate in any further portion of the study.
2. To be interviewed individually by me (Marianne Simon) three times. All interviews will be done face-to-face. The interviews will be between 60 and 90 minutes. Each interview will be recorded and transcribed.
3. To review descriptions of events, analysis, or answering additional questions as needed.
4. To review the final analysis of the data to ensure its accuracy.

Your identity will be kept confidential throughout the process. Pseudonyms will be used for all audio files, as well as on all documents. These documents will be retained for three years before being destroyed. They will be kept in a locked cabinet and on a secure server. There are less than minimal risk for your participation in this study. You are free to leave the study at any time with no consequence to you.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Marianne Simon at 904-234-4715 or N00016972@unf.edu to begin your participation.

Sincerely,

Marianne Simon

Appendix B-Participant Survey

Participant Survey

The following survey is being giving to identify new principals (year one, two, or three) who share common attributes to be interviewed for a phenomenological research study.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Title	
Type of school leading	Title I Non-Title I School Grade: A B C D F
Complete years as elementary principal	
Type of principal prep program	
Number of years as assistant principal (which county/counties)	
Type of assistant principal prep program	
Highest degree earned	MA/MS PhD EdD Other
Undergraduate Major	
Graduate Major	
Other positions held in schools	
Other careers outside of schools	

Appendix C-Informed Consent

Informed Consent Document

Hello, my name is Marianne Simon, and I am a doctoral student at the University of North Florida. I am conducting a research study on New Principals: Experiences that Influence the Role to influence principal preparation programs, assistant principal experiences, and supports for new principals to potentially reduce new principal turnover.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to participate in the study?

If you take part in my project, you will take a survey and participate in three in-depth interviews. The survey will take 15 minutes to answer. After you complete the survey, you **may** be selected to participate in a series of three interviews. The interviews will be scheduled over a two-month period and each interview will be between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Each interview will be audio recorded and done face-to-face. When the interviews have been completed and analyzed, you will be asked to review a written description of your experience and the composite description developed from the research data.

What are the risks and benefits to me?

Although there are no direct benefits to or compensation for taking part in this study, others may benefit from the information we learn from the results of this study. Additionally, there are no foreseeable risks for taking part in this project. Participation is voluntary and there are no penalties for deciding not to participate, skipping questions, or withdrawing your participation. You may choose not to participate in this research without negatively impacting your relationship with UNF.

How will you keep my information confidential?

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential. All paper files will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All audio files will be stored using pseudonyms, which do not identify participants by name and will be saved on a password protected data storage system. When the results are disseminated, pseudonyms will also be used.

Voluntary consent by participant:

By signing below, you are agreeing that you read and fully understand the contents of this document and are openly giving consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing below, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate in this study described to you by Marianne Simon.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact me. A copy of this form will be given to you to keep for your records.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or if you would like to contact someone about a research-related injury, please contact the chair of the UNF Institutional Review board by calling (904) 620-2498 or emailing irb@unf.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix D-Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Interview #1	Probing questions
<p>In this first interview, we are going to look at your life experiences that brought you to this point.</p> <p>1. Tell me about your experiences in elementary school as a child.</p>	<p>Were you a good student? Did you like school? Memories of teachers that stood out?</p>
<p>2. Continue on through middle and high school. What experiences do you recall? How did you feel about those years in school?</p>	<p>Were you a good student? Did you like school? Memories of teachers that stood out?</p>
<p>3. Tell me about your college experience.</p>	<p>Had you already decided on education as a major? Why or why not? Any intern experiences? Feeling and thoughts about those experiences.</p>
<p>4. What did you do when you first left college?</p>	
<p>5. How was your experience as a teacher? Think of positive and negative memories.</p>	
<p>6. Who were your mentors as a teacher? Describe any key learnings.</p>	<p>How did you get support when needed?</p>
<p>7. Describe your teaching career.</p>	
<p>8. Were you ever a mentor to others? Take any leadership roles?</p>	
<p>9. How did you get to the principal role?</p>	
<p>10. How was your assistant principal experience?</p>	<p>What were some major challenges? How did you navigate those challenges? What were your greatest memories? What was your relationship like with the principal?</p>
<p>11. Who were your mentors as an assistant principal? Describe any key learnings.</p>	
<p>12. Describe any programs you participated in to become a school principal.</p>	<p>What components helped you the most and why? What do you wish would have been a part of the program?</p>
<p>13. Anything else about your journey to the principalship that you would like to add?</p>	

Interview #2	Probing questions
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In this next interview, we are going to look at your experiences as a new principal.	
1. What are some of the important tasks or roles of being a school principal?	Probe if any of the following are not mentioned: student achievement, instructional leadership, organizational leadership, parent and community engagement, professional and ethical behavior (Florida Leadership Standards)
2. Which of these tasks or roles do you find to be the easiest or most enjoyable?	
3. What past experiences do you feel aided you in doing those tasks well?	
4. Which of these tasks or roles do you find to be the most challenging?	
5. What are some of the strategies used to work through these challenges?	Are there experiences in the past you have had that helped you through these challenges?
6. Where do you look for support?	Do you receive district level support? Is it helpful? Relationships with other principals?
7. What past experiences would have been helpful to better prepare you for these challenges?	
8. What is it like to be a new principal? Talk me through your thoughts and feelings of being a new principal.	
9. What causes you the most stress as a new principal?	How does it affect others in your life? Family, friends, etc.
10. What causes the most enjoyment as a new principal?	
11. What does the day in the life of a principal look like? Describe your typical day.	
12. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your current experience as a new principal?	

Interview #3 In this last interview, we are going to look at what you have learned about the experience of being a new principal.	Probing questions
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1. What are some things that you learned about yourself from this experience?	
2. Have you become a better leader? Explain.	
3. Based on what you have learned, what does it mean for your future as a principal?	
4. As someone who is responsible for developing future leaders, what experiences do you feel you should make sure they have before the principalship?	
5. Any other reflections you would like to make in regard to your experiences as a first year principal?	

Appendix E-Sample of Codebook

Sample of Codebook

Code	Definition	Example
Growing Up	Experiences that occurred outside of the school setting and as a child	Kelly: "Teachers in my school were very much put on a pedestal, they were like the leaders of the town, educators were superheroes to me" Maggie: "I always knew I wanted to be a teacher", "small community"
Personal School Experiences	Experiences that occurred during K-12 and College that influenced the participant's role of principal	Mary: "I was always interested in school, I wasn't the smartest kid yet, but I did work very hard" Amy: "overachiever", "experienced diversity" Jennifer: "had a teacher who advocated for me", "pushed me to greater heights"
Teaching Experience	Teaching experiences that influenced the participant's role of principal	Kelly: "I had to learn what it means to be a great teacher, and so I studied a lot, I read a lot of books, and I listened a lot" Maggie: "I had a mentor who really took me under her wing and just truly showed me the dos and don'ts"
Coaching Experience	Coaching experiences (Official and Unofficial) that influenced the participant's role of principal	Mary: "I was very humble", "I just built a team and trust" Amy: "unofficial math coach", "lead discussions on data" Jennifer: "I was coaching as the PDF", I started taking on interns and showing them best practices, even some of the novice teachers"
Assistant Principal Experience	Experiences as an assistant principal that influenced the participant's role of principal	Kelly: "There was no like, how to be an assistant principal list. I really did not understand what the role meant; I didn't understand what my tasks were" Amy: "my principal tried to pull me in when she was making decisions"