Promoting Growth and Self-Efficacy: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of First-Year Assistant Principals

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Promoting Growth and Self-Efficacy: A Phenomenological Study Of the Lived Experiences of First-Year Assistant Principals

By

Debra Cowart Murdock

A Dissertation
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Kennesaw State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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2018
Promoting Growth and Self-Efficacy: A Phenomenological Study Of the Lived Experiences of First-Year Assistant Principals

By

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Pages in Study 194

Candidate for Degree of Doctor of Education
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the many who have believed in my dreams and supported my professional journey. To my husband, Lance, thank you for patience, inspiration, and enthusiastic encouragement of my passions and goals. To my sons, Jesey and Jarrett, I hope one day you will benefit from our better understanding of the importance of supporting and growing new leaders in our schools as you make your way into educational leadership. To my girls, Kelsie and Kindell, cherished are those who love and work for children. To my mom and dad, Martha and Jerry, thank you for always believing in and encouraging me with the insistence that I believe in and achieve the best in myself. Finally, to my colleagues and peers in educational leadership, thank you for working to make classrooms better for our most important resource, our children.
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To the unsung heroes: my professors and peers at Kennesaw State University and the school leaders in my district, thank you for continuing to demonstrate and expect excellence while maintaining the promise of family and unity. To Dr. Jorrin-Abellán, thank you for providing the structure of my future work. To Sheryl Croft, thank you for encouraging and guiding me with your high standards and your penchant for wise words. To Dr. Susan Padgett-Harrison, thank you for a life time of guidance, mentoring, and friendship. To Dr. Mary Chandler, thank you for serving as an inspiration and standard for the work of coaching with integrity…we will not let you down. To Dr. Brian Hightower, thank you for leading our School District with integrity and expectation. Your support of my work is so appreciated. To my colleague, Dr. Nicole Holmes, thank you for your support and guidance. To Dr. Abby May,
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Appreciation is mere words unless backed by integrity of thought and action. Peter Block, influential coach and author of *Flawless Consulting*, noted that we should “Start measuring our work by the optimism and self-sufficiency you leave behind” (as quoted in Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005, p. 4).
ABSTRACT

PROMOTING GROWTH AND SELF-EFFICACY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

by

Debra Murdock
Kennesaw State University, 2018

Newly appointed assistant principals face a myriad of challenges. Often, the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals are ambiguous, primarily consisting of managerial and organizational type tasks. The lack of a systemic focus for assistant principals coupled with the assigned menial type jobs can leave new assistant principals with professional learning gaps. In the current model of high-stakes accountability for schools and school districts, educational leaders must redefine the role of assistant principals into a more distinct position that includes a strong emphasis on instructional leadership. Structured and systemic professional learning is necessary in order to build the capacity and self-efficacy of these new leaders. This qualitative research study examined the lived experiences of new assistant principals participating in a leadership professional learning academy in one suburban school district. This phenomenological case study examined the experiences of the new assistant principals and their thoughts and perceptions on the leadership academy in building their leadership capacity and self-efficacy. The assistant principals were provided opportunities to experience multiple structured professional learning opportunities including workshop-style learning experiences conducted by district leaders, individualized and personalized coaching sessions, scenario-based modules, goal-setting, and participation in a cohort of district peers. This study will examine the lived experiences of assistant principals in the program.
Keywords: Assistant Principal; Case Study; Coaching; Leadership Academy; Mentoring; Phenomenology; Professional Learning, Qualitative Study; Self-Efficacy
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the reform-minded, accountability-driven culture that demands constant school improvement, school-based leaders have greater responsibilities than ever before. While research has clearly defined the importance of teacher effectiveness as the most important factor in improving student achievement, the second most important variable in student achievement is the influence of strong school-based leadership (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Additionally, a clear correlation has been demonstrated in the link between teacher effectiveness and the successful governance of the building-level leadership (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Building-level leaders are responsible for promoting teacher capacity and articulating a clear vision for school improvement (Fuller, 2012) within a framework for collaboration and shared decision making with teachers, parents, and key stakeholders from the community. As noted by Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms (2011, p. 2), “It is neither teachers alone nor leaders alone who improve schools, but teachers and leaders working together.” Therefore, investing in attracting, training, and retaining the most effective teachers and administrators should be a top priority for educational leaders (Hightower et al., 2011).

While there is a large research base supporting the importance of professional learning for building-level principals (Augustine-Shaw, 2015; Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012; Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013), there is an absence of literature on the significance of systemic professional learning for assistant principals (Matthew, 2003; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012; Petrides, Jimes, & Karaglani, 2014). The assistant principalship often serves as
the beginning step of the career pathway for all upper-level educational leaders, including principals and superintendents. Therefore, school districts should seek to invest in careful career planning and professional learning for assistant principals (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

Historically, many have overlooked the importance of the role of the assistant principal. Some educational leaders consider the position an underutilized resource. William I. Pharis, executive director of the National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP), called the role of the assistant principal the “forgotten man” (Glanz, 1994, p. 283), and Harvey (1994) noted that the assistant principal was a “wasted educational resource” (p. 17). Hartzell (1993) even described the assistant principal position as the “neglected actor in practitioner literature” (p. 707). Due to the demands placed on schools in terms of academic performance and systemic school improvement, the promotion of the assistant principal from one of mid-level manager to that of instructional leader is a needed transformation. Levine (2005) noted,

In an outcome-based and accountability driven era, administrators have to lead their schools in the rethinking of goals, priorities, finances, staffing, curriculum, pedagogies, learning resources, assessment methods, technology, and the use of time and space. They have to engage in continuous evaluation and school improvement, create a sense of community, and build morale in a time of transition (p.12).

However, few assistant principals come into the position prepared for the role. Progressive school districts are redesigning the position of the assistant principal by providing systemic professional learning opportunities so that the position can evolve into the more adept and effective role of instructional leader (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012).
The assistant principal position is a critical component in the evolution of school success. Assistant principals play a crucial role in educational organizations particularly in respect to school reform. The assistant principal is frequently the first, entry-level position for educational administrators. Assistant principals are traditionally the first to handle parents and discipline problems; as such, they maintain the norms, expectations, and rules for school culture. Additionally, assistant principals frequently address conflicts that develop among staff, students, and the school community, often playing the mediator or negotiator. Finally, assistant principals work to solve the daily issues that affect the school and school district (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Consequently, their role on the “front-lines” of schools is a very important one in promoting a positive school culture and climate.

Assistant principals become the principals, district-level leaders, and superintendents of the future and, as such, need progressive, systemic professional learning opportunities at the beginning of and throughout their careers to build the knowledge, vision-setting abilities, self-determination, and self-efficacy needed to become effective leaders.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived, shared experiences of new assistant principals who participated in a district’s leadership professional learning academy. This phenomenological research was designed within the case study of a district’s leadership academy to explore the assistant principals’ experiences, their beliefs on how participating in the leadership academy promoted their leadership capacity, and their feelings of self-efficacy throughout the process.

In the limited research available on assistant principals, most researchers describe the restricted responsibilities given to the position. Additionally, research on assistant principals
notes the feelings of frustration experienced by those in the position stemming from the lack of position, power, and control, much of which is delineated by the building-level principal (Black, 2002; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). By focusing on the lived experiences of the new assistant principals, this study sought to understand the job roles, cultures, responsibilities, policies, and daily challenges faced by the participants. Additionally, the study sought to gain understanding of the assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy and leadership capacity as participants of the leadership academy.

This research has implications for school district administrators, colleges and universities, state educational agencies, and for others who provide professional learning for new assistant principals.

**Statement of the Problem**

The demand for accountability for educational leaders has increased dramatically since early in the century with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation (2001). Due to the responsibility and liability asserted on educational leaders from governmental and community forces, school districts have placed new urgency on building-level leaders to produce school reform results by demonstrating increases in student achievement (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Prothero, 2015). Building-level leaders are responsible for creating and initiating a school-wide vision for school success; serving as instructional and curriculum leaders; assuming the role of assessment and data management experts; managing budgets; solving disciplinary problems and policy mandates; and serving the needs of students, parents, teachers, and community stakeholders. As such, the training created for the preparation of assistant principals is vital to overall school and student achievement and success.
Educational researchers have noted the overlooked instructional resources available to schools through the untapped potential of the assistant principal. Gurley, Anast-May, and Lee (2013) suggested the importance of reforming the role of the assistant principal from that of mid-level manager to an invested instructional leader capable of assisting the principal in creating a vision for systemic school-wide improvement. School systems need enthusiastic and innovative school-based leaders in assistant principals to meet the challenges presented by state and federal accountability, community expectations, and declining resources.

This study explored the experiences of new assistant principals participating in a leadership academy, and it could provide district leaders and policy-makers with insights on promoting and growing the position of assistant principal. By focusing research on assistant principals in terms of their professional growth and self-efficacy, school-district leaders and policymakers could affect innovation, instructional leadership, and student achievement for schools. Further, by working to create effective professional growth experiences for assistant principals, district-leaders and policymakers could positively influence the supply of effective, future educational leaders (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

**Research Questions**

In order to examine the lived experiences of new assistant principals participating in a professional learning academy, this phenomenological case study will seek to respond to one primary research question:

1. What are the experiences of first-year assistant principals participating in a professional learning leadership academy?

Two additional questions will provide additional information to the phenomenological aspect and will frame the case study:
a. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

b. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

**Significance of the Study**

Educational literature does not contain extensive empirical research on the role, preparation, and/or promotion of assistant principals. However, assistant principals play an important role in today’s school reform efforts. Historically, assistant principals have been considered in a secondary role, mostly to support the needs of the building principal. As a result, the work of assistant principals has not been researched extensively (Oleszewski et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2014; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993). These factors warrant further research into the role of the assistant principalship.

Traditionally, school administrative responsibilities have been divided into two categories: operational management and instructional leadership. Contemporary leaders are expected to manage effectively the operational duties required to support and foster an effective learning environment for students while simultaneously operating as the instructional leader needed to stimulate school reform and improvement in student achievement (Horng, Klasik, and Loeb, 2009). Assistant principals are a vital resource in creating and fulfilling instructional and administrative responsibilities, but often need supplemental support and guidance in becoming proficient in the role (Petrides et al., 2014).

Assistant principals occupy a vital position in schools for several reasons. First, the assistant principal position is often the first step in the career path for future principals and district-level leaders. Second, assistant principals are the first to handle disciplinary and social
justice issues including racism, poverty, and fractured families; as such, they are responsible for the expectations and rules that dominate school culture. Third, assistant principals frequently mediate conflicts within the school culture requiring them to have an understanding of local, state, and federal mandates. Finally, assistant principals are the first to encounter the dilemmas of the systems at work within a school. As such, they have an understanding of the school dynamic that is uncommon to anyone else within the school system (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

Along with the growing demands of accountability and the political pressures of continued school reform and student achievement, there are increased expectations for assistant principals to be instructional leaders who have expertise in pedagogy, instructional content, and learning strategies (Goldring et al., 2009). Further, Weller and Weller (2002) and Petrides et al. (2014) have noted the importance of assistant principals having a practical approach to guiding the attitudes, cultural norms, and expectations needed to support teachers.

New assistant principals often face challenges in meeting the organizational and instructional demands of the position (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Bolman (2010) offered that new assistant principals could face confusion, disappointment, and disillusionment as they navigate the day-to-day obstacles of their work in schools. Armstrong (2015) advocated for further study of the experiences of assistant principals, arguing the need for partnerships between professional learning programs and “regulatory bodies,” including school districts, that would support and enrich scaffolded, continuous learning necessary for assistant principals to further develop their leadership skills.

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of new assistant principals in understanding their roles and feelings of self-efficacy as they participate in a scaffolded professional learning academy. The results of this research could inform and influence
educational practices and procedures surrounding the professional learning of assistant principals. Further implications may influence the efforts of school districts, institutions of higher learning, and regulatory bodies in planning and creating support of professional experiences for new educational leaders.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

The adult learning theory or andragogy influenced this study. Andragogy was proposed first by Malcolm Knowles in 1968 to distinguish between the learning of adults and that of children, also known as pedagogy. Knowles asserted that five basic assumptions categorized adult learners. An Adult Learner is:

- An individual who can direct his or her own learning through an independent self-concept;
- Someone who has a “reservoir” of life experiences that serves as a resource for future learning;
- A person who has learning wants and needs closely related to the development of social roles;
- Someone who is problem-centered and wants an immediate return on new knowledge; and
- An individual who is self-motivated by internal factors (Knowles, 1990; Merriam, 2001).

Further, Knowles (1984) suggested four principles are applied to adult learners including:

- The need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction;
• Experiences, including mistakes, should provide the basis for all learning activities;

• Problem-centered activities, rather than content-oriented activities, should drive the professional learning; and,

• Learning and activities should have immediate relevance and impact for real-life application.

Knowles (1980) proposed a model for designing, implementing, and assessing learning experiences for adults based on the four principles and noted adults are capable of directing, or at least collaborating, in the planning and design of their own learning (p. 47). This study focused on the lived experiences of new assistant principals, their perceptions of their own self-efficacy, and their beliefs of professional practice; as such, considering aspects of the adult learning theory informed the underlying assumptions of the study. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the components featured in this research study.
A theoretical framework, as defined by Eisenhart (1991), is “a structure that guides research by relying on formal theory and constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships” (p. 205). Mertens (2015) notes that the theoretical framework “has implications for every decision made in the research process” (p. 3). The theoretical framework of this study is connected to the conceptual framework by researching the role of adult learning or andragogy in the lives of the new assistant principals while also exploring the leaders’ feelings of self-efficacy.

The adult learning theory describes the learner as one who has a readiness to learn and wants to use new learning to improve practice. The self-efficacy theory, based on the work of Albert Bandura, served as a guide for the theoretical framework. As the study sought to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of new assistant principals who participated in a structured professional learning academy with secondary questions that explored the self-
efficacy of the leaders and their feelings of professional growth within the case study component of the leadership academy, the self-efficacy theory also informed the work.

Albert Bandura (1977), in his seminal work, *Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change*, introduced the importance of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as “the beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Self-efficacy theory “acknowledges the diversity of human capabilities and treats the efficacy of the belief system not as an omnibus trait but as a differentiated set of self-beliefs linked to distinct realms of functioning” (p. 36). Bandura (1994) noted that such beliefs produce diverse effects through four major processes: affective processes (emotional states and reactions); cognitive processes (thinking involved in the acquisition, organization, and utilization of information); motivation (activation to action); and selection processes (how and what one selects).

According to Bandura (1997), individuals’ beliefs about their own personal efficacy form a major component of their self-knowledge. Self-efficacy awareness is constructed from four principle sources: mastery experiences (successful completion of tasks); vicarious experiences (modeling the success of others); verbal persuasion (self-affirming beliefs that promote development and acquisition of skills); and, physiological and affective states (health, mood, stress, and other factors influence one’s ability to promote self-efficacious thoughts). Figure 2 (below) illustrates Bandura’s self-efficacy theory.

Contemporary researchers including Anderson, Krajewski, Goffin, and Jackson (2008) and Paglis (2010) have linked self-efficacy beliefs to the realm of leadership and designated the term: *Leader Self-Efficacy* (LSE). Anderson et al. (2008) noted a link between efficacy beliefs and strong leadership characteristics including perseverance and determination. Ladegard and
Gjerde (2014) define Leader Self-Efficacy as one’s abilities to “mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to master the tasks involved in the leader’s role successfully” (p. 635).

This study investigated the self-efficacy perceptions of new assistant principals who participated in the professional learning of the leadership academy. Researchers including Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang, and Avolio (2011) and Luthans and Peterson (2003) found that a leader’s self-efficacy predicted his or her ability to successfully perform tasks which, consequently, influenced evaluations on leadership performance indicators. The current study illustrated the influence of the self-efficacy of the assistant principals in terms of their performance and attitude toward professional learning therefore addressing the question of the relevance of the leadership academy to new assistant principals.

Components of Knowles’ adult learning theory and Bandura’s self-efficacy theory combine to form an interconnected context for the research study. The study sought to promote an understanding of the major tenets and principles of adult learning and self-efficacy theories as told through the lived experiences of the new assistant principals.
Figure 2: Self-Efficacy Theory. Adapted from Self-Efficacy: The exercise of control, by A. Bandura. Copyright 1997 by W. H. Freeman and Company.
Review of Relevant Terms

The research study utilized the following terms:

- **Adult learning theory** - Adult learning or andragogy is the science and art of how adults learn (Knowles, 1980).

- **Assistant Principal** - an entry-level position in educational leader who supports the organizational and instructional functions of schools at the direction and in support of the building principal or leader (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

- **Case Study** - research methodology in which the researchers studies a relevant, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time and through detailed data collection (Creswell, 2013).

- **Coaching** - An individualized professional learning strategy focused on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates the self-directed learning of the client through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate (Van Nieuwerburg, 2012).

- **Leadership Academy** - professional learning program designed to expand the leadership capacity of educators (Superintendent’s Leadership Academy, 2017).

- **Mentoring** - process designed to develop the mentee’s ability to acquire knowledge, skills, and self-confidence to become a better student, teacher, or leader (Hastings & Kane, 2018).

- **Phenomenology** - a qualitative research method in which the researcher describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon or concept (Creswell, 2013).
• Professional Development or Learning-process of developing school-based leaders by enhancing the necessary instructional skills and knowledge needed to successful perform the functions (Oliver, 2005).

• Qualitative Study-primarily exploratory research designed to provide insight or gain an understanding of the reasons, opinions, or motivations of individuals (DeFranzo, 2011).

• Self-Efficacy- an individual’s belief about his or her capabilities to succeed in accomplishing a task or in specific situations (Bandura, 1977).

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 of this study documents the background and purpose of the research study. In addition, Chapter 1 presents the statement of the problem, the research questions, the significance of the study, a theoretical and conceptual framework, and a review of relevant terms. Chapter 2 incorporates a review of relevant literature including a historical overview of the assistant principal position, the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal position, professional learning for assistant principals, coaching for educational leaders, leadership and student achievement, and leader self-efficacy. Chapter 3 documents the researcher’s methodology including an explanation of the researcher’s worldview and research traditions used in the study. Additionally, the research design, participants, and the process for data collection are described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 contains the findings of the research and details the participants’ lived experiences within the data analysis. Chapter 5 details the conclusions, the implications of the research study, and the recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Assistant principals have been an underappreciated and underutilized resource in schools. In contemporary research, the assistant principal has been called the “forgotten man” (William I. Pharis, as quoted in Glanz, 1994, p. 283), a “wasted educational resource” (Harvey, 1994, p.17) and the “neglected actor in practitioner literature” (Hartzell, 1993, p. 707). The work of assistant principals has been underrepresented in educational literature (Glanz, 1994; Harvey, 1994; Kaplan & Owings, 1999; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Greenfield (1985) posited that research has “added little to the knowledge base informing the practice of educational administration” (p.23). Although the assistant principal role has received little attention in literature from researchers or educational leaders, many consider the role an essential part of necessary school reform to increase student achievement (Celikten, 2001; Greenfield, 1985; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Recent professional learning activities have included structured and scaffolded experiences for building-level leaders including leadership coaching (Aguilar, 2013; Bloom et al., 2005; Fletcher, 2012; Grant, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010; Lochmiller, 2014; Wang, 2013). In the contemporary reform-minded era of educational school improvement, the effectiveness of school-based leadership, including the principal and the assistant principal, is vital for enhancing student learning and success (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2004; Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Walstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Marzano et al., 2005).
Review of Literature

Historical Overview of the Assistant Principalship

Historically, the role of the assistant principal has been practically ignored in terms of educational researchers’ recognition of the position as important to school-level leadership (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Matthew, 2003; Petrides et al., 2014). Marshall and Hooley (2006) noted that the old Encyclopedia of School Administration and Supervision did not mention the role of the assistant principal. Hartzell (1993) referred to the assistant principal as the “neglected actor in practitioner literature” (p. 707). Marshall (1993) noted, “Little attention has been granted to the training and selection, job satisfaction, and motivation of assistant principals” (p. 3). The position of assistant principal was developed initially in the early part of the 1900s to reduce the burden on the building principal as schools and school districts experienced sudden increases in student enrollment (Hausman et al., 2002). The position of assistant principal was not a planned and calculated addition to school-based leadership but rather emerged hastily from need without clear direction or careful preparation (Mertz & McNeely, 1999).

The assistant principal position has been described as essential to overall school effectiveness, but many acknowledge that the role has too often only been responsible for menial tasks including those set aside or neglected by the principal (Austin & Brown, 1970). Much of the early research on assistant principals focused on their duties and their feelings of frustration with the little autonomy given to assert vision and direction on those assigned duties (Mertz & McNeely, 1999). Throughout much of history, the professional focus for assistant principals remained operationally-based with a vast array of unwritten and undefined tasks and roles (Marshall, 1993). The role of the assistant principal in the daily operations of schools “is some
combination of that which is assigned, expected, and assumed” (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 1991, p.1).

While the responsibilities assigned to assistant principals are often menial and managerial in scope, the assigning of duties remains largely left to the principal, even in school districts where the assistant principal role is more clearly defined (Brottman, 1981), resulting in a lack of systemic practice from school to school (Mertz & McNeely, 1999). Consequently, the relationship developed between the principal and assistant principals has been viewed as a crucial factor in the future success of the assistant principal (Austin & Brown, 1970; Gorton, 1987; Kaplan & Owings, 1999). Gorton (1987) found that “the principal is the key to improving the assistant principalship” (p. 3). Further, Hartzell et al. (1995) noted that the assistant principal must assume an initiative stance in promoting his or her influence and position by building a strong and collaborative relationship with the building principal.

Research on the evolution of assistant principals’ roles indicates a dramatic increase in duties, but little uniformity exists in defining the job as a whole (Brottman, 1981; Hayes, 1986). Therefore, the job description for most assistant principals is vague and lacks clear definition, even considering that the assistant principal manages many different types of important duties and faces many obstacles each day (Celikten, 2001). Consequently, the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal have remained ambiguous throughout time with many duties left with little direction or uniformity (Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

In the 1980s, researchers called for a redesign of the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal (Greenfield, 1985; Harvey, 1994; Marshall & Greenfield, 1987; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985), including a more clearly articulated job description with broadened job responsibilities to include the important role of instructional leader. As part of the redesign
process, researchers called for structured, systematic support mechanisms and professional learning for assistant principals to combat the lack of job satisfaction for those who viewed the position as an “intermediary rung” in their quest for a higher leadership position (Gurley et al., 2013).

More recently, the assistant principalship has been the focus of renewed study among researchers. Reports from contemporary research indicate that these leaders are increasingly likely to enter a hectic, challenging, and fragmented working situation (Armstrong, 2010; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Consequently, job-embedded professional learning is crucial to the success of assistant principals in expertly performing the demanding and challenging role of the assistant principal in schools.

**Roles and Responsibilities of the Assistant Principal**

The assistant principalship has noted little change in the direction and structure since its inception, resulting in a lack of a concrete definition of the role (Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Consequently, the assistant principalship is “linked to practices and taken-for-granted notions of the past” (Glanz, p. 286). The roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal consist mainly of a collection of supervisory type responsibilities including student discipline and supervision, relieving the principal of duties, providing administrative support to teachers, and other managerial type duties (Koru, 1993). Due to the lack of a widespread, systemic job description for assistant principals, roles vary widely and are often a personalized function created by principals in individual schools (Barnett et al., 2012; Kwan, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Petrides et al., 2014).

Assistant principals spend much of their day dealing with the three Bs: “books, behinds and buses” (Good, 2008, p. 46). Assistant principals have been described as both a “caretaker”
(Harvey, 1994) and a “policeman” (Koru, 1993) whose duties include acting as safety officers enforcing school rules, providing supervision, and managing conflicts. Assistant principals throughout the nation spend much of their day managing disciplinary and supervisory related issues, including dealing with disruptive students, lunch duty or supervision, parent complaints, scheduling coverage, and administrative paperwork (Glanz, 1994; Hausman et al., 2002; Kwan & Walker, 2012).

Despite some recent study of the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals, the complex nature of the job has seen little change over time (Peters, Gurley, Fifolt, Collins, & McNeese, 2015). Assistant principals often are forced to function in a conservative, status quo model of operations (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Researchers and educators warn against the “wasted potential” of assistant principals who frequently are relegated to managerial tasks (Gurley et al., 2013). Marshall and Greenfield (1987) suggested that by restricting assistant principals to managerial roles, a forced over-compliance among leaders could develop where original and creative thought would be stymied. The lack of continuous engagement in curriculum-based decisions and instructional practices, goal identification and development, and process implementation could repress the development of assistant principals as visionary leaders (Hartzell, 1993). Due to this lack of autonomy and creative thought processing, many assistant principals struggle when faced with promotion to a principalship, a position thought by district leaders to be a “change agent” responsibility.

The most recent dialogue among educational leaders and researchers calls for reform of the assistant principalship via professional learning designed to increase instructional leadership capacity (Greenfield, 1985; Gurley et al., 2013; Panyako & Rorie, 1987). The position of assistant principal is often one of the first and most important roles in the hierarchy of
educational leaders’ career pathways. The quality of the transition from teacher to assistant principal has a lasting impact on the belief system, reflective practices, and attitudes developed by future leaders (Herrington & Kearney, 2011). Redefining the assistant principal’s role to one of instructional leader is crucial as schools and school districts become increasingly complex systems with the demands of high stakes accountability (Celikten, 2001).

**Professional Learning for Assistant Principals**

The impact and effect of professional development for assistant principals has been absent from research literature. Since school and school community environments have evolved becoming more diverse, challenging, and accountability-driven, educational leaders must prepare assistant principals to deal with “the milieu confronting them as their job responsibilities and tasks continue to change” (Oliver, 2005, p. 90). The process of assistant principal preparation, also called leadership succession, requires thoughtful recruitment, professional development support, and plans for retention (Read, 2012). As society continues to face tremendous change in the way schools operate, school leaders must also be prepared to face shifting and challenging school leadership roles (Grogan & Andrews, 2005).

Leadership professional learning programs have become of great interest to school districts, universities, and professional regulatory agencies in response to the need for well-trained and innovative school leaders (Read, 2012). From the earliest days of university-lead educational leadership programs in the late nineteenth century, there seemed an uncertainty about specific goals and purposes for assistant principals (Levine, p.15). Levine (2005) notes, “The majority of the programs that prepare school leaders range in quality from inadequate to poor…At the same time, programs employ too many full-time professors who have had little or no recent experience with the practice of school administration” (p.5).
Traditional preparation programs of the past have failed to adequately prepare assistant principals for their diverse, challenging roles (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Hartzell, 1993; Levine, 2005). In a report by the Wallace Foundation, “*Becoming a Leader: Preparing School Principals for Today’s Schools*” (Mitgang, 2008), the author noted that many states have developed mentoring programs and training academies designed for new principals and assistant principals. Given the need for well-trained and qualified leaders, researchers have advocated for new professional learning opportunities including those created by for-profit institutions, nonprofits, school systems, and pre-service programs in partnerships with universities and colleges (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Levine, 2005). While debate among educational leaders and researchers continues regarding the nature of leadership development programs offered to assistant principals (Boerema, 2011), researchers (e.g., Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Levine, 2005) advocate for planned, systemic, and continuous support throughout the careers of assistant principals.

Although pre-service training opportunities for assistant principals are uncommon, well-designed programs have common components that offer participants the opportunity to demonstrate evidence of leadership knowledge, skills, practices, and flexibility in meeting the demands of the job (Armstrong, 2010). Several components are common in effective professional learning programs designed for educational leaders including:

- A comprehensive and coherent curriculum that aligns with state and professional standards;
- A vision that emphasizes instructional leadership best practices and perpetual school improvement;
- Student-centered instructional practices that integrate theory and promotes reflection;
• A knowledgeable faculty composed of collegiate professionals and educational practitioners experienced in school administration;
• A supportive cohort structure that includes formalized mentoring or coaching by experts in leadership;
• Targeted recruitment of outstanding teacher leaders with leadership potential; and
• A comprehensive and supervised administrative internship program that allows candidates to engage in leadership responsibilities over time (Armstrong, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Armstrong (2010) further advocated the need for cooperative partnerships between regulatory certification agencies, local school districts, and local colleges and universities in supporting the professional learning of assistant principals.

Research on in-service leadership development programs details the importance of a variety of training opportunities including scenario-based experiences and professional mentoring by experts in the field. Boerema (2011) and Bolam (1999) described four types of programs for in-service professional learning including training through skill-building, feedback, experiential learning in leadership concepts, and training through formal personal growth experiences. Further, Daresh and Playko (1992) advocated for the inclusion of job-embedded professional learning experiences for school administrators, citing the need for continued support in acquiring the skills needed for success. Additionally, research indicates that the most successful programs contain a mix of the mentioned activities. Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (2007) noted the importance of professional learning programs for assistant principals to begin during induction or pre-service and to continue throughout the career of assistant principals.
Professional learning for assistant principals is important for future school improvement and student achievement. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) noted that “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning” (p. 4). Further, Leithwood et al. (2004) noted that leadership explains about 5-7% of the difference in pupil learning and achievement or about one-fourth of the achievement increase total across schools. Both induction programs and on-going professional development opportunities are important but rarely afforded to assistant principals (Jayne, 1996).

While an absence of research literature exists on district-directed or job-embedded professional learning opportunities, the influence of professional experiences and positive guidance on new administrators is important (Hamilton, Ross, Steinbach, & Leithwood, 1996; Leithwood, Steinbach, & Begley, 1992; Leithwood et al., 2004). Situated cognition or problem-solving expertise requires learners to be immersed in “authentic, non-routine professional learning activities embedded in a supportive organizational culture” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 68). In order to promote the growth of new leaders, situational, practical thinking, and reflective practices learning should be offered to develop what researchers Scribner and Lave (1984) define as a model of expert practical thinking. The model of practical thinking consists of components including the ability to solve problems with a well-developed, rationale solution; to respond flexibly to situational problems; and to develop practices that reduce the demands needed for future problem-solving.

Professional development programs for educational leaders are necessary to cultivate leadership practices, including the ability of schools to promote systemic reform through increased student achievement. Schools and school district leaders responsible for school reform
face the urgent task of assuring that school-based leaders have the skills needed to move beyond managerial tasks to become skilled problem-solvers and instructional leaders.

**Coaching for Educational Leaders**

Although many definitions of coaching exist in current literature among researchers and practitioners, most have common components that include a collaborative, individualized, and sustained relationship between a “coach” and a “client or coachee” for the purpose of personalized professional learning. Coaching has been described as a one-on-one relationship designed to support self-reflection and enhance skill development (Lochmiller, 2014). According to Grant et al. (2010), coaching is styled as professional learning designed to help clients establish goals with the intent to promote growth and to develop professional and personal functioning and capacity. Furthermore, Wisker, Exley, Antoniou, Ridley, and Morris (2008) define coaching as “a structured one-to-one learning relationship between a coach and coachee aimed at developing competence and improving performance in the coachee” (p.21). Many other researchers (e.g., Aguilar, 2013; Chandler, Roebuck, Swan & Brock, 2011; Fusco, O’Riordan, & Palmer, 2015; Klarin, 2015) describe the role of the coach as more encompassing and include the ability to achieve professional development goals through engaging and purposeful dialogue. The International Coach Federation defines the role of a coach as the following:

A coach provides continuing support that is safe and confidential and has as its goal nurturing significant personal, professional, and instructional growth through a process that unfolds over time. A coach brings outside perspective and has no stake in the status quo in an organization (Bloom et al., 2005, p. 10).
While researchers have slight variations on the definition of coaching, most agree that the collaborative nature of coaching is designed to unlock one’s potential in order to maximize his or her performance.

Mentoring served as a popular professional growth experience for educational leaders prior to 1995; however, coaching has since emerged as a preferred professional learning strategy for developing leaders (Fletcher, 2012). Due to the similarities in design, distinguishing between mentoring and coaching has created confusion among some practitioners. The attempt to use *mentoring* and *coaching* as synonymous terms demonstrates a clear lack of understanding in the practices. While some struggle to differentiate the subtle differences between mentoring and coaching (Gallucci, Van Lare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010), mentoring is thought to be a relationship of investment in a younger generation or group whereas coaching is believed to be a relationship among equals (Mullen, 2012). Further, educational mentoring has been referred to as an individual’s work “on” a fellow or colleague while coaching is more distinctly fashioned as “working with” an individual for systemic improvement to practice (Strober & Grant, 2006, p.21). Mentors are typically organizational insiders acting as an expert in the related field and are thought to outline specific tasks for their protégés. Conversely, coaches tend to be from outside an organization and construct a sustained partnership promoting self-growth and development (Barkley & Bianco, 2010, p.24; Bloom et al., 2005, p.5).

Researchers and practitioners have described the coaching process as one that facilitates growth and supports clients by helping them to: recognize and identify preferred outcomes; establish and monitor goal setting; enhance motivation through reflective practice; build self-efficacy; create specific action plans; review and assess progress; and reflect on and adjust plans or goals in order to achieve successful outcomes (Grant et al., 2010; Wang, 2013). Additionally,
researchers have noted several applications for the coaching processes including reflection upon strategy and best practice, seeking or providing feedback, supporting career induction or transition, working towards or setting goals and priorities, and supporting professional development or other study (Fletcher, 2012).

The history of coaching has a direct connection to ancient Greek philosophy and the philosophers of the age. Coaching has been described as a process of self-growth and development and as a means for discovering success and happiness through sustained professional dialogue. Ancient Greek philosophers were consumed with investigations and thoughts on the meaning of human existence, the reason for being, and the means of finding contentment. Socrates advocated that the path to happiness was linked to self-knowledge and understanding. Further, critical thinking and reasoning is based on a Socratic idea of a measured process of evaluating information in order to make a decision. This process, better known as the Socratic Method, is believed by many researchers (e.g., Brock, 2013; Ciporen, 2015; Hagen, 2012; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001) to be the essential design of coaching. The Socratic Method describes dialogue as a vessel to explore and construct meaning just as the coach works to use dialogue, questioning, and exploration to promote self-awareness and a better understand of personal beliefs for the client (Psotaki, 2015).

The term coach was first used in 1840 at Oxford University as a slang term for a private tutor who would assist others in preparing for exams. By the 1880s, coach was used popularly in sports to describe the individual in charge of a rowing crew. Later the term further evolved to describe any athletic trainer or leader who was tasked with improving the performance of athletes and teams in sports (Evered & Selman, 1989; Wenzel, 2000). The term evolved in meaning in the early 1900s when three salesmen, Ralph Butler, Herbert DeBower, and John
George Jones, coined the term ‘coach’ as a way to describe a set of managerial actions rooted in psychological counseling. Butler, DeBower, and Jones acknowledged that coaching, as a professional growth activity, could motivate and organize their sales force improving operations and profits (Hagen, 2012). The timeline of coaching research continued to 1937 when Richard Gorby conducted the first study on the impact of coaching on manufacturing efficiency (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001, p.14).

Coaching, as a professional growth activity for educators, developed in the early 2000s with the emergence of more rigorous and demanding leadership expectations regarding school improvement and accountability as detailed in the No Child Left Behind legislation (2001). Recent research has noted empirical findings that show leadership development programs and leadership practices directly and indirectly influence student performance (Levine, 2007; Southwood, 2002). As such, professional learning activities, including coaching, can assist educational leaders in creating a positive school-wide climate, promoting greater self-understanding, and improving leadership skills (Chandler et al., 2011).

Educational leadership coaching has dominated discussion and planning for professional growth-minded leaders since 2005. While empirical research is somewhat lacking, educational leaders and researchers have taken notice of the professional development potential of coaching as first outlined prominently in the business sector (Aguilar, 2013; Bloom et al., 2005; Fletcher, 2000; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Knight, 2007; Lochmiller, 2014; Tolhurst, 2006). The National Staff Development Council launched a pilot coaching initiative in 2000 with more than 50 principals and superintendents receiving weekly coaching sessions for one year, and it served as the first known scheduled professional learning for school leadership coaching (Reiss, 2015, p.17)
School leadership coaching derives from a careful understanding of emotional intelligences, adult learning, and the diverse needs of current education leaders. School leaders need sustained and job-embedded professional learning to be successful in the current landscape of high-stakes accountability and continuous school reform. The role of school leader can be isolating and lonely work in which some could feel vulnerable and insecure. Consequently, many leaders are turning to “coaching for empathy, reassurance, and as a mechanism to develop their own reflective practices” (Bloom et al., 2005, p. 11).

Several models or types of leadership coaching have been used in educational settings to support schools and school leaders. The most common types of leadership coaching include facilitative coaching, instructional or directive coaching, collaborative coaching, consultative coaching, and transformational coaching (Aguilar, p. 20; Bloom et al., 2005; Fletcher, 2012, p. 33; Knight, 2007; Lochmiller, 2014). These models of educational leadership coaching typically emphasize the client’s thinking or practices while focusing on the development of leadership skills and competencies needed to support goals and outcomes (Lochmiller, 2014).

Facilitative coaching, according to Bloom et al. (2005, p. 60), is designed to construct new skills, beliefs, information, understanding, and interpretations to build upon the existing skills, beliefs, understandings, and interpretations of the client. In the process, the coach does not concentrate on sharing his or her own professional experiences, but instead on developing the client’s self-awareness and self-actualization as in reflective practice. The client is encouraged to make evaluations and synthesize learning in the partnership. The coach acts as a facilitator in gathering and interpreting data and creating interpretations while providing feedback to the client (Bloom et al., p. 60). Facilitative coaching can have numerous positive outcomes for school-based leaders, including creating new options by re-examining data; gathering and evaluating
new or existing data, considering new possibilities, evolving problem-solving abilities, and creating an ability to promote self-reflective practices (Bloom et al., pp-60-67).

Directive or instructional coaching is based upon traditional teaching strategies where the coach shares his or her professional experiences and approaches in order to support the needs of the client. Directive or instructional coaching was developed at the University of Kansas and researched comprehensively by Cornett and Knight (2009). Directive coaching is used in many situations to change a predetermined behavior (Aguilar, 2013, p. 20). There are several strategies used in directive coaching including direct instruction, modeling, providing resources, and role-playing. Directive coaching is used when it is clear that quick, decisive action must be taken in order to support the client. When necessary, directive coaching can provide immediate benefit to the leader through shared professional knowledge, resources, or guidance (Bloom et al., 2005, pp. 68-69; Fletcher, 2012, p. 33). While necessary and beneficial to the client at times, directive coaching can be more limiting in promoting sustained, long-term changed behaviors or internalization of practices (Aguilar, p. 22).

Collaborative coaching is an approach that combines facilitative and directive or instructional coaching in a blended model to support the needs of the client. Collaborative coaching is most productive when the coach and client have identified a need or goal that can be explored in partnership with both parties. According to Bloom et al. (2005, p. 76), collaborative coaching works best when the coach “brings expertise, resources, and perspectives” to a project or situation while the client brings “intimate knowledge of the situation and the positional authority to implement action.” In effective collaborative coaching, the coach would offer several options to the process, and the client would determine the best course of action from the recommendations (Bloom et al., 2005, p. 77; Fletcher, 2012, p. 33).
Consultative coaching has similarities in design to collaborative coaching. As in collaborative coaching, the work of consultative coaching is designed to rely upon the expertise of the coach in the partnership. While the coach may share his or her expertise, advice, and/or knowledge, he or she does not participate in any actions or results from the process. In the consultative coach relationship, the focus is related to the school agenda or processes and could include supportive services such as data collection or analysis in order to serve the needs of the school or client (Bloom et al., 2005, pp. 80-82).

Transformational coaching has roots in two other disciplines, ontological coaching and cognitive-behavioral therapy, and has not been widely utilized in school settings. Transformational coaching, based on ontology, is described as the philosophy of being and is based on the work of Robert Hargrove (2008) who used transformational coaching in the business world, the work of Peter Senge (1990) who developed the theory of systems thinking, and, from the writings of Margaret Wheatley (Aguilar, 2013, p. 25). Echeverria and Olalla (1992) developed ontological coaching to examine the role of language in affecting human behavior and one’s way of being. While coaching is not therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy does influence transformational coaching. Cognitive-behavior therapy helps patients to recognize and modify negative behaviors. As such, the combination of these practices forms transformational coaching where clients explore new ideas, thoughts, practices, or ways of being (Bloom et al., 2005, pp. 83-89). In addition to utilizing ontological coaching and cognitive-behavior therapy, transformational coaching includes techniques from instructional and facilitative coaching. According to Aguilar (2013), transformational coaching is directed at three domains including “the behaviors, beliefs, and being of the client; the institution and systems within the context; and, the broader social and educational systems in which we operate” (p.25).
As noted by Daresh and Playko (1992), coaching can provide a framework for a sustained, job-embedded professional learning so that school leaders can gain and further develop the skills needed to be successful. Coaching, according to Bloom et al. (2005, p.5), “provides deliberate support” to assist the learning process in clarifying and achieving goals for educational leaders. Contemporary researchers including Aguilar (2013), Bloom et al. (2005), Knight (2007), Lochmiller (2014), and Reiss (2015) advocate the benefits of leadership coaching. Reiss (2015, p. 18) noted that educational leaders are often seeking sustained professional learning in order to meet the demands of the high-stakes reform needed for increased student achievement and overarching school improvement.

While there is a lack of empirical research demonstrating the impact of coaching over time, there is substantiated evidence of the positive impact of coaching for educational leadership (Lochmiller, 2014). As Ravitch (2010, p. 3) noted, there are “no shortcuts, no utopias, and no silver bullets” for promising, comprehensive school reform; however, coaching can be a prominent component of the multifaceted redesign of professional learning for leaders (Aguilar, 2013, p. 15).

**Leadership and Student Achievement**

Research indicates that building-level leadership has a significant influence on student achievement. Leithwood et al. (2004) noted that the influence of strong school-based leadership is second only in effect to successful classroom instruction among all-school related variables in contributing to student achievement. Researchers (e.g., Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005, p. 5) indicate that school-based leaders impact student achievement by creating environments that allow improved teacher
instructional practices, making managerial decisions about the allocation of resources and programs, and promoting high expectations and collaborative practices in schools.

Leithwood and Seashore-Louis (2013, p. 3) argue that continuous school improvement is directly related to school-based leader behaviors, which have an indirect influence on student achievement. Evidence demonstrates the impact leadership actions have on the successful learning in all schools; however, existing research indicates those effects “are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). Further, research indicates no documented examples of at-risks schools reforming without the intervention of a strong and effective school-based leader (Mendels, 2017).

Common to most definitions of leadership are two functions: “providing direction and exercising influence” (Leithwood et al., 2004 p. 20). While the effects of school leadership on students are understood to be primarily indirect (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Witziers, Bosker & Krüger, 2003), the total of direct and indirect effects of leadership on student learning equals about twenty-five percent of the total effect (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). Yukl (2013) describes leadership influence to include “the interpretation of events for followers, the choice of objectives for the group or organization, the organization of work activities to accomplish objectives, the motivation of followers to achieve the objectives, the maintenance of cooperative relationships and teamwork, and the enlistment of support and cooperation from people outside the group or organization” (p. 3).

Several common categories of good leadership practices closely resemble the transformational approach of leadership described by Bass (1997) as useful and relevant for many difficult organizational and cultural situations and account for success in reform efforts for schools (Leithwood et al., 2004). These leadership practices were termed purposes, people and
structures, and social systems by Hallinger & Heck (1999); visioning strategies, efficacy-building strategies, and context changing strategies by Conger & Kanungo (2003); and setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program by Leithwood and his various colleagues (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010).

Leithwood et al. (2004) noted that one of the most important aspects of leadership is to develop a shared understanding of the goals and purposes that support the school-wide vision. Theoretically, the need to support the direction-setting practices is based on human motivation theories (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Ford, 1996). Accordingly, individuals are encouraged and motivated by goals that are shared, interesting, and achievable. According to Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 24), “Visioning and establishing purpose are also enhanced by monitoring organizational performance and promoting effective communication and collaboration.”

The review of relevant literature suggests three factors influence successful leadership on student achievement in schools. First, the effect of leadership on student achievement has been noted as mostly indirect, guided by school-based leaders’ influence on other people or contexts of the organization. Leadership’s influence on student achievement depends on the amount of time, attention, and resources given to the “who” and “what” of the organization (Leithwood et al., 2004). Secondly, research evidence suggests that school-based leaders should spend considerable effort in identifying “the school mission and goals, culture, teachers’ participation in decision making, and relationships with parents and the wider school community as potentially powerful determinants of student learning” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 13). Finally, further study is needed to determine how to systemically improve leadership practices through planned intervention, professional learning, and district support (Leithwood et al., 2004).
Leader Self-Efficacy

Albert Bandura’s (1997) construct of self-efficacy refers to “an individual’s confidence about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a given context” (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998, p.66). Given the underlying constructs of social cognitive theory that inform and define the connection between efficacy and job performance (Wood & Bandura, 1989), the beliefs leaders have regarding their abilities are vitally important. McCollum and Kajs (2007) offer, “Efficacy, which is a component of social cognitive theory, is a powerful construct and holds great promise for the development of effective school leaders who face changing times” (p. 132).

Efficacy beliefs connected to leadership are referred to as Leadership Self-Efficacy (LSE). Leadership self-efficacy is defined as “the leader’s awareness of, and confidence in, their abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to master the tasks involved in their leader role successfully” (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014, p. 635). Hannah, Luthans, and Harms (2008) noted further, “Leadership efficacy is a specific form of efficacy associated with the level of confidence in the knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with leading others” (p.669).

Research has shown that leaders who have high degrees of self-efficacy for a given task will perform better than those with lower levels of self-efficacy. Further, high self-efficacy is a predictor to both high levels of performance and the eventual outcome of high levels of performance (Bandura, 1997). Leadership efficacy has strong correlations to leadership performance ratings (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014) and often predicts a leader’s performance and rated evaluation (Lester et al., 2011). Further, a leader’s confidence in his or her ability to
perform in the leadership role could influence staff engagement and observed leader effectiveness (Luthans & Peterson, 2003).

Self-efficacy beliefs, according to Bandura (2000), are malleable and can improve through mastery experience, vicarious learning, and social persuasion. Training, or professional learning, provides individuals with the opportunity to gain skills and achieve success, therefore increasing self-efficacy through performance attainments (Bandura, 1986) and increasing the expectation related to the completion of associated tasks (Bandura, 1997). Professional learning research indicates positive effects of training on self-efficacy (e.g., Kozlowski et al., 2001; Murphy & Johnson, 2016). Lester et al. (2011) also found that mentoring relationships promoted gains in leader self-efficacy. Coaching, as a professional learning activity, is designed as a collaborative, job-embedded partnership that facilitates the improvement of skills, life experiences, goal attainment, self-directed learning, reflective practice and self-efficacy (Wang, 2013).

Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2009) have noted the link between leadership and student learning. The researchers noted effective leadership practices would promote and contribute to leader self-efficacy. Based on evidence from districts, schools, and non-educational organizations, three categories of leadership practices serve as the core of successful leadership. Hallinger and Heck (1999) brand the categories of leader practices as purposes, people, and structures and social systems. Conger and Kanungo (2003) term the practices visioning strategies, efficacy-building strategies, and context changing strategies. Leithwood et al. (2009) categorize the strategies as setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and good management.
The research on the self-efficacy of leadership highlights the importance of confidence in meeting the demands of the current high-stakes educational environments. Leaders who are highly self-efficacious use personal and internal resources when confronted with challenges (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). Further, these leaders are self-regulatory, confident, and calm even in difficult situations. The characteristics of highly efficacious leaders are critical in promoting systemic change in terms of school reform. Dimmock and Hattie (1996) noted school leaders “who are considered most likely to retain excellent leadership practices in the future were those who had the highest self-efficacy” (p. 73).

**Summary**

Educational research on the assistant principal is limited; however, the most notable research on the topic describes the role and responsibilities of the assistant principal position. Recent studies by researchers and educational leaders call for a redesign of the assistant principal position with focus on professional learning to support the demand by governmental forces and community activists for systemic school improvement. Assistant principals need to understand their roles and need to have the opportunity to participate in structured professional learning in order to promote self-efficacy and leadership capacity. Further, in order to positively influence the demand for systemic school improvement through student achievement, assistant principals are important factors in evoking change. Systemic professional learning opportunities that begin with induction and continue throughout the career of assistant principals are critical in developing self-effacious thoughts, actions, and practices. Professional learning supports including leadership coaching can provide educational leaders with sustained, personalized professional growth opportunities.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A primary responsibility of schools and school district leaders is to promote a vision for sustained school reform and improved student achievement. Researchers including Leithwood, et al. (2004) and Lochmiller (2014) have noted that successful, effective school leadership is one of the most influential factors in improving student achievement, second only to the influence of quality instruction from an effective teacher. While literature exists on the importance of principal professional learning for school reform and student achievement, researchers (e.g., Matthew, 2003; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2014) have noted an absence of literature on professional learning for assistant principals.

Hartzell (1993) noted the lack of professional learning opportunities for assistant principals has stymied their development as visionary leaders, calling the position the “neglected actor in practitioner literature” (p. 707). The assistant principal position, while once overlooked and underutilized in terms of instructional leadership, has been described as a critical asset in the revolution of successful school reform. Assistant principals become the principals, district-level leaders, and superintendents of the future, and as such, need progressive, systemic professional learning opportunities early in their career to build the knowledge, vision setting abilities, self-determination, and self-efficacy needed to become successful (Barnett et al., 2012).

Browne-Ferrigno (2003) and Boerema (2011) posited the need for professional learning programs for assistant principals. Research has demonstrated that school districts that promote strong principal and assistant principal leadership development programs invest in careful selection of promising teacher leaders and provide extensive job-embedded training in the technical aspects of school leadership to accelerate leader competency development.
Research Questions

In order to examine the lived experiences of new assistant principals participating in a professional learning leadership academy, this phenomenological case study will seek to respond to one primary research question:

1. What are the experiences of first-year assistant principals participating in a professional development leadership academy?

Two additional questions will provide additional information to the phenomenological aspect of the research and will frame the case study:

a. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

b. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

Research Design

Worldview and Research Tradition

The qualitative research method of a phenomenology, set within a bounded case study, was used to frame this research. As the researcher, I utilized interviews, observations, and field notes to gather important information. According to Creswell (2014), the research approach is the “plan or proposal to conduct research, involving the intersection of philosophy, research design, and scientific method” (p. 5).

Researchers must examine their worldview assumptions brought to a study and the research design that is related to the worldview. Guba (1990) defines a worldview as a “basic set of beliefs that guide actions” (p. 17). Further, Creswell (2014) describes worldviews as “general
philosophical orientations about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study” (p.6). Qualitative research includes four primary worldviews including constructivism, post-positivism, pragmatism, and transformative (Mertens, 2015) (see Figures 3 and 4).

### Four Worldviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructivism</th>
<th>Post-Positivism</th>
<th>Pragmatism</th>
<th>Transformative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding</td>
<td>• Determination</td>
<td>• Problem-centered</td>
<td>• Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Theory generation</td>
<td>• Reductionism</td>
<td>• Pluralistic</td>
<td>• Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Multiple participant meanings</td>
<td>• Empirical observation/measuremen</td>
<td>• Consequences of actions</td>
<td>• Change-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social and historical construction</td>
<td>• Theory verification</td>
<td>• Real-world practice orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3: Four Worldviews. Adapted from The paradigm dialogues by Guba, p. 17. Copyright 1990 by Sage, cited in Creswell, 2014, p. 6*

#### Constructivism

Constructivism came from the ideas of Mannheim and was noted in works including Berger and Lukemann’s (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality, Naturalistic Inquiry* by Lincoln and Guba (1985), *Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences Revisited* by Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011), *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity and Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods* by Mertens (2015), and *The Foundation of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* by Crotty (1998). A basic tenet of the Constructivist paradigm includes the notion that reality is socially constructed. The paradigm grew out of the philosophy of
Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology and the interpretative understanding of Wilhelm Dilthey’s work called hermeneutics (Mertens, 2015).

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretive understanding or meaning; as such, constructivists seek to better understand the world in which they live and work, developing subjective interpretations of their experiences where the goal of the research is to rely on the participant’s view of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015). Constructivists describe the term *hermeneutics* as a method for “interpreting the meaning of something from a certain standpoint or situation” (Mertens, 2015, p. 16). Clegg and Slife (2009) noted the work of Martin Heidegger who posited, “All meaning, including the meaning of research findings, is fundamentally interpretive” (p. 26).

The basic conventions in the Constructivist paradigm include that knowledge is “socially constructed by people active in the research process and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those that live it” (Mertens, 2015, p.17; Schwandt, 2000). The paradigm further suggests that research is a “product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them” (Mertens, p. 17).

Constructivists utilize open-ended questioning and carefully observe their participants in their life settings. Constructivists often address the interactions among participants while focusing on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand historical and cultural settings. The Constructivist researcher’s goal is to interpret the meaning others have about the world or their experiences (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998). Schwandt (2000) noted that the “everyday constructivist” believes that constructivism means “human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it” (p. 197).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Axiology</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Theoretical Perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructivism</strong></td>
<td>There is no single reality or truth; socially constructed realities from multiple sources;</td>
<td>Reality must be interpreted; values are explicitly noted; interactive relationship between researcher and participants; researcher visits contexts and interprets based on his/her background</td>
<td>Equal representation of views; raise awareness of participants;</td>
<td>Qualitative; Possibly includes: interview, observation. Case Study; Life History; Narrative; Phenomenology; Action Research</td>
<td>Interpretivism: reality needs interpretation; Critical Inquiry; Feminism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-positivism</strong></td>
<td>There is a single reality or truth (more realistic); truth or known is within probability range</td>
<td>Reality must be measured; focus on reliable and trustworthy measures; researcher must maintain objectivity</td>
<td>Equal opportunities; justice; informed consent to minimize harm</td>
<td>Quantitative; interventions; experimental research; survey research</td>
<td>Positivism; Post-positivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pragmatism</strong></td>
<td>All individuals have an interpretation of reality; reality is constantly renegotiated, debated</td>
<td>Researcher determines what relationships are included in the story; change is valued.</td>
<td>Influenced by the researchers’ values and politics, driven by pursuit of knowledge; a focus on the problem instead of the method using all approaches available.</td>
<td>Research can vary; approaches and methods based on needs of research; mixed methods</td>
<td>Deweyian Pragmatism; Research through design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transformative</strong></td>
<td>Realities are socially constructed; individuals are under constant internal influence; various versions of reality based on social status; recognition of social status and reality</td>
<td>Interactive relationship between researcher and participants; reality and knowledge are both socially and historically constructed; research has an action agenda</td>
<td>Promotion of human rights; attention to social justice, marginalized individuals, and issues of power discrimination; respect for norms of the culture</td>
<td>Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods; Action Research;</td>
<td>Critical Theorist; Marxism; Queer Theory; Feminism; Race;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4:** Worldview Paradigms. Adapted from *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (4th ed.) by D.M. Mertens. Copyright 2015 by Sage Publications and *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* by J. W. Creswell. Copyright 2014 by Sage Publications.

This study was interpretive in nature and sought the understanding of the lived experiences of the new assistant principals in the bound system of the leadership academy. The phenomenological case study design created an opportunity to better understand and interpret the experiences, beliefs, and understandings of the participants. As such, I brought a Constructivist worldview to this qualitative research.
Qualitative research, according to Mertens (2015), is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and is by design, a set of “interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p.236). Qualitative research employs an inductive, naturalistic, and interpretive approach where the researcher studies individuals in an attempt to interpret a phenomenon. Further, qualitative methods allow the researcher to gather and utilize empirical materials in the context of historical and observational text to interpret meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The purpose of qualitative educational research is to improve practice and understanding through the examination of the lived experiences of others. The methodological design utilized in this study combined two research traditions in qualitative research: phenomenology and case study. Phenomenological research emphasizes the individual’s subjective experiences (Wertz, 2005) and attempts to document the individual’s perceptions and experiences (Mertens, 2015) based on an assumption that “there is an essence or essences to shared experiences” (Patton, 1990, p. 70). Further, Patton (1990) noted that phenomenological research is focused on individuals’ meaning of the human experience. Mertens (2015) noted the intent of phenomenology is to describe an event or experience through the point of view of participants. Further, Mertens noted phenomenological research varies from other qualitative research methods as the “subjective experience is at the center of the inquiry (p. 247). Moustakas (1994) is accepted generally as the founder of phenomenological research. Moustakas detailed major procedural steps in the research process that are a benefit to the novice researcher.

According to Creswell (2014), case study research involves the study of a “case within a real-life contemporary context or setting” (p. 97). By combining research traditions for the study, the researcher sought to explore a deeper understanding of the lived experience of new
assistant principals within the contemporary bounded system of the leadership academy (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2009).

The phenomenological case study diagram, Figure 5, helped to organize the study, including the context, questions, topics, data gathering, and resources. The study took place in a suburban school district. The district level leaders developed a differentiated leadership academy for four levels of aspiring or developing leaders, including teacher leaders, new assistant principals, aspiring principals, and new principals. This phenomenology study explored the lived experience of new assistant principals within the bound case of the district’s leadership academy.
Figure 5 Phenomenology Study Diagram, Adapted from Anticipated data reduction strategy [ERDR 9100 Advanced Qualitative Research Methods] by I. Jorrin-Abellán. Copyright 2014 by Kennesaw State University.
This research study also contained a review of relevant literature, including the historical significance of the assistant principalship, professional learning for assistant principals, the role of coaching for educational leaders in promoting professional growth, the impact of the assistant principalship on student achievement, and the meaning of self-efficacy for educational leaders.

Interviews, questionnaires, and observations were conducted to gather data. Miles and Huberman (1994) described the process for understanding collected evidences as data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. According to the researchers, data reduction describes the processes of selecting, refining, and transforming the collected data in a qualitative study. The context of this case was to understand the lived experience of new assistant principals participating in a leadership academy. Data, including interviews, questionnaires, observations, and field notes, were gathered to understand the experiences of the new leaders.

**Participants**

Creswell (2014) noted the importance of purposefully selecting participants and sites for any qualitative study. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe four important components of selecting site locations and participants for a qualitative study including: the setting or where the study will take place, the participants or who will be the focus of the study, the events or what the participants will be observed doing, and the process or the evolving events of the participants.

This study focused on a large suburban school district in Georgia. In the past 15 years, the school district has experience both unprecedented growth and exceptional student achievement on all standardized assessment measures. The district has 41 schools comprised of six high schools, seven middle schools, 24 elementary schools, and several centers that include
multiple pre-school locations and alternative school options. The district has an average of 33% of students who receive free or reduced meals but has concentrations of schools where that percentage is much higher in six Title I schools. The student population has exceeded 42,000, and the district is the county’s largest employer with more than 5,000 teachers and staff members. Demographic information for students includes: 71.4% - White, 16.2% - Hispanic, 7.3% - Black, 3.1% - Mixed Race, 1.7% - Asian, and .2% - American Indian. The student population within the district is diverse academically and socio-economically. The district achievement data includes a graduation rate of 87.1%. The district performed well on the state’s accountability measure, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). The CCRPI score is assessed annually for all schools and school districts in Georgia. Each school and district receives a performance score based on achievement including content mastery of state assessments and high school graduation rates, student progress on state assessments, and achievement gap closures of student achievement data. Schools and school districts are given a scaled score of 0 to 100 with the school district involved in this study earning a score of 81.8.

The school district articulates a vision for their major system priorities that serves as an organizational framework for the district. The major tenets of the major system priorities include the following:

a. Establishing internationally competitive standards for student performance to ensure that all students are challenged individually and collectively;
b. Ensuring that students have educational programs that prepare them for a diverse and technologically rich society;
c. Ensuring that all students and staff have a safe and secure learning environment;
d. Utilizing technology both to improve student achievement and to increase the district’s productivity;

e. Increasing parental and community involvement through policies that treat stakeholders as partners;

f. Addressing the exploding student population growth; and

g. Attracting, retaining and training the best teachers, principals, and support staff possible.

The ability of the school district to “grow their own leaders” also continues to be a priority and a central component of the district’s vision. The challenges for school-based leaders have never been more daunting, nor have the stakes for success been higher than in today’s reform-minded educational arena. The district’s leadership academy was designed to expand the leadership capacity of outstanding educators and to further develop the skillsets and transitional aspects of new principals and assistant principals. The district recently redesigned their leadership professional development process to provide more concentrated efforts on individualized professional learning while maintaining the importance of collaboration and network-building. Activities in the leadership academy include interactive seminars, case studies, interactive scenario experiences, personalized leadership coaching, job shadowing, and book studies.

The Superintendent’s Leadership Academy (SLA) includes four levels of support and utilizes a tiered, differentiated model in order to build leadership capacity and self-efficacy for new leaders at varying levels within the district. The SLA I is designed for high-capacity teacher leaders who aspire to become district administrators, instructional leaders (Academic Coaches), or assistant principals. The SLA II supports all new assistant principals in the district with
professional learning, professional leadership coaching, a collaborative cohort, and scenario-based growth activities. The SLA III offers experienced assistant principals the opportunity to continue building leadership capacity as they prepare for a possible principalship or district office appointment. The SLA IV supports the needs of new principals in the first- and second-year of the principalship with planned meetings, a peer mentor, and individualized leadership coaching.

The Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II, designed for new assistant principals, will serve as the context of the study. The district offered new leaders several components of support including one-on-one professional coaching, scenario-based modules, case studies, and participating in a cohort with peers. The school district created the professional learning components of the SLA II program after soliciting participant feedback from a pre-learning survey. Information collected from the survey (Appendix D) allowed insight into the participants’ perceptions on personalized leadership coaching, the roles and responsibilities associated with their new positions, professional learning beliefs, and professional goal setting. The new assistant principals participated in purposeful group meetings designed to explore various leadership scenarios while continuing to build the collaboration and collegiality of the cohort. Personalized leadership coaching sessions began in January with all members participating in at least six scheduled sessions. The SLA II experience closed at the end of the school year with presentation by participants and a scheduled debrief by district staff.

This study will focus on 13 new assistant principals in the school district, each of whom have no previous experiences in the role but all of whom participated in the SLA I academy. Participants include seven new high school assistant principals, one new middle school assistant
principal, and five new elementary assistant principals. Demographic information from the study participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21-30 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50 years</td>
<td>7</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-9 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20+ years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

As noted by Creswell (2013), a phenomenology examines a “phenomenon to be explored in terms of a single concept or idea…such as the educational idea of professional growth” (p.78). The phenomenological case study examines the phenomenon of a group of people who have all shared the same lived experience – participating in a leadership academy during the first year of the assistant principalship. Data collection of Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II participants will consist of interviews, the examination of district pre-learning survey, observation, and field notes.

The district administered a questionnaire in preparation of the leadership academy prior to the start of the leadership academy. The leadership academy (SLA II) for the new assistant principals began in late September and continued through May, culminating in a final presentation or activity. Each Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II Participant continued with his/her Leadership Coaching sessions through the end of the school year. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants at the end of the school year in May with follow-up semi-structured interviews scheduled, if needed. The listing of interview protocol and questions can be located in Appendix E. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and securely stored. In addition to interviews and the questionnaire, data sources included field notes from observations. A transcription service, Rev.com, was used to transcribe all data, and NVivo software was utilized to document and analyze the data collected.

Interviews.

Interviews were an important part of the data collection process and allowed for a rich, detailed understanding of the experiences of the participants to be revealed. All participants
were reminded of informed consent guidelines prior to the interview process. The interviews were conducted at the participant’s school location in order to promote comfort and confidence in setting. Study participants shared their experiences as first-year assistant principals and their views on the impact on their professional growth and self-efficacy through the interview protocol. Data collected from participant interviews served to promote the most valuable components of the experiences from the study participants.

**Pre-learning surveys.**

The school district’s pre-learning open-ended survey was utilized to gather feedback and participant insight on the professional learning components of the SLA process including perceptions on professional learning practices and leadership coaching. The participants’ feedback provided valuable insights into the learning process and included the participants’ perceptions on previous experiences with leadership coaching and school-based leadership opportunities.

**Observation and field notes.**

Creswell (2013) noted the act of observing and collecting notes of a phenomenon in the field setting are valuable tools in qualitative research. Observation and field note data gathered from sessions of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy provided important insight into the participants’ cohort relationship. Observation data regarding to participants’ perceived value of the leadership cohort and planned learning activities were observed and noted.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers including Guba and Lincoln (2005) have suggested that trustworthiness in the qualitative processes is the study’s worth. As such, the researchers
developed a framework or guide for the ethical practice of qualitative research based on a revised understanding of the researched-researcher relationship (Guba and Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative research concerns including truth-value (the appearance of being true as noted by the data and phenomena), applicability (requires the study be conducted in such a way that situational or chronological variation are irrelevant), and consistency (the use of instruments to produce stable results).

According to Guba (1981), these four concerns can be addressed using the four tenets of reliable research trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Guba and Lincoln (2003) structured their criteria for rigor in research based on the “researcher-researched relationship” and defined the roles for trustworthiness and authenticity including:

- Balance or Fairness - comprehensive representation of stakeholders;
- Ontological authenticity - the process of making participants aware of the constructs of reality;
- Educative authenticity - the responsibility to educate others about the experiences of the stakeholder group;
- Catalytic authenticity - the process of enabling stakeholders to respond to the call of action; and
- Tactical Authenticity - training participants to act on their own behalf.

Further, researchers who apply the Constructivists worldview should adhere to additional criteria including the following:
- Reflexivity - the researcher conveys his/her background, how it informs his/her interpretation of the information in a study, and what he/she will gain from the study (Creswell, 2013, p. 47);
- Rapport – the degree of comfort between the researcher and the research participant (Givens, 2011); and
- Reciprocity – the feelings of the researcher to give back to the participant during the interview process (Mertens, 2009, p. 259).

Mertens (2015) noted that Constructivists’ research and writings on ethical principles have moved “closer to alignment with those of transformative researchers” (p. 18-31) where the role and the past knowledge of the researcher informs the ethical practice of the research.

Further, Creswell (2013) noted the preference for using “validation” in the place of “trustworthiness” in order to stress the process of qualitative study (p. 250). Creswell and Miller (2000) focused on eight strategies used by qualitative researchers to document the accuracy of their strategies.

Creswell and Miller’s (2000) eight strategies include:

a. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation including building trust, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation;
b. Triangulation using multiple and different resources and methods to provide collaborating evidences;
c. Peer reviewing or debriefing to provide an external check of the research;
d. Negative case analysis to refine the working hypotheses through the inquiry process;
e. Clarifying research biases from the beginning and throughout the research process;

f. Member checking to seek the researcher to seek participants’ input on the credibility of the findings;

g. Rich, detailed descriptions to allow the researcher to thoroughly detail all aspects of the study; and

h. External audits to allow an outside consultant to examine the process and the product to assess for accuracy.

The trustworthiness of the researcher, the study design, the information gathered, and the findings presented speak to the success of the study. This study was verifiable by adhering to the phenomenological model, foregrounding or disclosing past experiences based on a Constructivist worldview, and maintaining good data, including field notes. The Constructivist researcher’s worldview notes that the researcher and participants are “interlocked in an interactive process; each influencing the other” and, therefore, prefers a more personalized, interactive model of data collection. The concept of objectivity or neutrality is replaced with confirmability in the Constructivist worldview (Mertens, p. 19).

Validation of the study was accomplished by having multiple data sources that were collected in multiple moments of time (Creswell, 2013, p.246). Data, interpretations, and outcomes were connected to the participants and explained fully in the analysis of the research study. Multiple sources of data collection were used in order to promote validity.

In order to assure the maintenance of confidentiality, participants’ identifying information and the data collected were coded for additional security. The purpose and intent of the study were shared with the participants prior to the start of the research. Additionally, the
rights of participants regarding involvement were discussed in detail, and informed consent was collected from all participants. Participants and the school district remained confidential during the study. The researcher personalized strategies for assuring credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2015; Guba, 1981) are found in Table 2.
Table 2

Strategies to Ensure Trustworthiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Credibility** | • Build trust through prolonged engagement with the participants and facilitate the learning of the context of the study by building rapport with participants; 
• Promote consistency in process through interview questions, informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality; 
• Establish familiarity with the system so to build confidence and credibility; 
• Triangulate data by conducting two observations for triangulation of moments, and the observation and interviews were triangulation of methods; 
• Create tactics to ensure honesty: asking the same question more than once in different settings; 
• Engage in peer debriefing to promote credibility and test theories; 
• Perform member checks where data and interpretations are continuously tested. |
| **Transferability** | • Provide a detailed or thick description of the study, including assuring the voice of the participants so that others can recognize similarities which provides others with the ability to see the research in their own terms 
• Utilize a diverse group through theoretical/purposive sampling of participants to assure transferability. |
| **Dependability** | • Provide a complete and thorough description of the methodology including worldview, Anticipated Data Reduction (ADR), and data gathering protocols; 
• Provide an understanding and admission of my worldview in regard to how it shaped my study; 
• Detail an account of past experiences and knowledge bases to provide foreground for the study; 
• Provide an in-depth description of the work; phenomenological (phenomenological template) so that others can repeat the study in their own context yielding different findings/results; 
• Allow for review of work or audit so that the process and methodology can be evaluated as accurate. |
| **Confirmability** | • Create diagrams for Anticipated Data Reduction (ADR) and ADR Matrix; 
• Connect data, interpretations, and outcomes in context and with the participants; 
• Practice reflexivity by keeping a continuing journal of introspections; 
• Identify any ethical issues or concerns within the study; 
• Address limitations of the study; 
• Support the validity of claims by the multiple data sources and methods. |
Phenomenological research can provide a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals sharing an experience. Phenomenology does require an understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions, including the challenges associated with the research methodology. Mertens (2015) describes the intent of phenomenology is to “understand and describe meaning from the point of view of the participant” (p. 247). Phenomenological research varies from other types of qualitative research in that the subjective experiences of the participant are the focus of the research inquiry.

In order to promote the credibility and confirmability of the research process, I acknowledged personal experiences and presumptions in the research process. Lincoln and Guba (2000) called the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher or the “human instrument” (p. 183) as reflexivity or the research position. As an educator and administrator within the system, I did have familiarity with the participants and the leadership academy processes. Additionally, my career path has included serving as an assistant principal in the selected district. My experiences of matriculating through the district prior to the inception of the leadership academy process provided an insight into the purpose of the study and added a historical vantage point of professional learning within the district. Further, I have received professional training and certification as a leadership coach. Each of the coaches involved in this study were trained at the same university within the same cohort of peers promoting consistency of experiences for all participants. As a professional working in the field of leadership coaching, I have experienced the positive influence of coaching on educational leaders.

By utilizing my historical knowledge of the setting, my understanding of the position, and my experience with leadership coaching, I have promoted credibility and confirmability to the process while acknowledging how these factors might influence or inform the research. As
noted in the Constructivist paradigm, the researcher and the research are interconnected in the interactive process where in each has an influence over the other, therefore informing the research process.

**Data Analysis**

According to Creswell (2013), data analysis for qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data, reducing the data into themes through coding and reduction, and representing the data in a narrative or figures (p. 180). This study involved the lived experiences of new assistant principals who participated in a professional learning leadership academy. The data collected was comprised of interviews that were audiotaped, transcribed, and converted to text-based documents using Rev.com, a reputable and confidential transcription service. NVivo software (QRS International, 1999) was utilized to organize and analyze the collected data. NVivo is a qualitative research software package designed to aid in coding qualitative research studies.

The collected data was organized and analyzed in a design of data analysis suggested by Creswell (2013) and first modeled by Moustakas (1994). The data collected through interviews, observation, field notes, and the survey given to the participants by the school district were transcribed using Rev.com. Data collection including the transcription from the first structured interview and the second semi-structured interview (if applicable), observation notes, the district questionnaire, and field notes were all collected and included for analysis and reduction. Open coding was used to distinguish categories and the concepts of the participants.

The study’s design presented in a graphical representation can be found in Figure 5. The graphical representation notes the context and participants of the study – first year assistant
principals participating in a leadership academy in a suburban school district. The diagram further illustrates the issues of the phenomenological case study – the professional growth of the assistant principals in their new role and their feelings of self-efficacy in their leadership abilities. The Anticipated Data Reduction Diagram (Figure 6) and the Anticipated Data Reduction Matrix (Table 3) allowed for organization of subsequent details regarding the research process to develop. As noted by Miles and Huberman (1994), the data reduction process forces researchers to make difficult choices regarding which aspects of the data collection to highlight, minimize, or completely set aside.

Figure 6: Anticipated Data Reduction (ADR) Diagram
### Table 1

**Anticipated Data Reduction (ADR) Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do I need to know?</th>
<th>Why do I need to know this?</th>
<th>What kind of data will answer the questions?</th>
<th>Where can I find the data?</th>
<th>Whom do I contact for access?</th>
<th>Transfer for acquisition?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where are the new assistant principal's perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning academy?</td>
<td>To gain insights into the assistant principal's perceptions of self-efficacy after having participated in the learning academy provided during the leadership academy.</td>
<td>Interview questions: Do you believe the Leadership Academy improved your feelings of self-efficacy? Areas to analyze from interview include: 1. Perceptions of the impact of the Leadership Academy on self-efficacy. 2. Personal leadership experiences. 3. Personal beliefs about professional development. 4. Impact of professional development.</td>
<td>Interview with the participants at the conclusion of the Leadership Academy.</td>
<td>Interview with participants at the conclusion of the Leadership Academy.</td>
<td>After successful completion of the dimension proposal, interviews and other data collection will begin. Anticipated completion of interviews: May, 2018. Coding, transcription, and data analysis completed: August, 2018.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Where are the new assistant principal perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning academy? | To gain insights into the assistant principal's perceptions of professional growth after having participated in the learning academy provided during the leadership academy. | Interview questions: Do you believe the Leadership Academy improved your feelings of professional growth? Areas to analyze from interview include: 1. Perceptions of the impact of the Leadership Academy on professional growth. 2. Personal leadership experiences. 3. Personal beliefs about professional development. 4. Impact of professional development. | Interview with the participants at the conclusion of the Leadership Academy. | Interview with participants at the conclusion of the Leadership Academy. | After successful completion of the dimension proposal, interviews and other data collection will begin. Anticipated completion of interviews: May, 2018. Coding, transcription, and data analysis completed: August, 2018. |

Anticipated Data Reduction (ADR) Matrix. Adapted from *Qualitative data analysis, an expanded sourcebook* by Miles and Huberman. Copyright 1994 by Sage Publication.

The first step of data analysis, as recommended by Moustakas (1994), in phenomenological reduction is the horizontalization of the data. Moustakas notes that horizontalization is the process of reviewing the transcribed data for “significant statements, sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). Moustakas (1994) recommended that the researcher should be “receptive to every statement of the participants’ experience, granting each comment equal value” (p. 122). The use of the NVivo software facilitated the organization of emerging themes in the collected data so that “clusters of meaning” could be developed into prevalent themes for the study (Creswell, 2013, p. 82).
Moustakas suggested that each of the “clusters of meaning” or horizons be examined to ensure there were no overlapping or repetitive statements in a process of elimination (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Further, Moustakas noted the researcher should ask two questions when examining the horizontal statements: (1) “Does it contain a moment of experience that is necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?” and (2) “Is it possible to abstract and label it?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

The next step in the data analysis process was to write a textural description using the significant statements and themes in order to represent each of the individuals’ perceptions of the experience studied. The participants “own words” were used in the description to convey their unique perceptions and to promote the credibility and confirmability of the work (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Finally, a composite textural description was written of the phenomenon to provide the “what” and “how” from the participants’ perceptions. As Moustakas acknowledges the need for the researcher to include his/her own personal experiences in the research design, the researcher’s past knowledge and experiences were also included in the study (Creswell, 2013).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study allowed the researcher to examine the personalized experiences of new assistant principals who participated in a professional learning leadership academy. One limitation of this research was the context of the study that involved participants who have matriculated within the same school district. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the influence of the leadership academy, the study might offer a different insight if other assistant principals from outside the district could have been included in the overall study. A second limitation to the study was the complexity of examining the many components of the leadership academy and the participants’ ability to analyze how the activities influenced their leadership
capacity and self-efficacy. A third limitation to the study was that most of the participants, twelve of thirteen, were female. While the gender make-up of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy was predominately female, having a more balanced participant pool could be interesting for further study. Yet another consideration was my familiarity with the participants and the process. I have prior knowledge and experience with all of the participants prior to interviewing them, and some have worked with me directly. However, I believe this prior knowledge assisted in building trust with the participants and allowed for an informed researcher throughout the course of study.

**Ethical Considerations**

According to Ratner (2002), the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires of the researcher, his or her subjectivity, are tied intimately with qualitative research methodology. Subjectivity influences the choice of research topic, the formulation of a hypothesis, the type of methodology used, and the analysis of data. In examining my subjectivities in this research study, I acknowledged my previous knowledge-base of the school district, the process of becoming an educational leader, and my own feelings and perceptions of the assistant principalship having served as an assistant principal in the same district. Additionally, I have a working knowledge of the members of the leadership program, the components of the professional learning process, and the members of Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II (SLA), many of whom I personally know through past experiences and interactions. Additionally, as a trained leadership coach, I have witnessed the success of coaching as a professional learning activity. During data collection and analysis, I used my understanding of the process and participants to promote credibility within the study.
Ethical concerns can avail themselves during any stage of the research process, including prior to the beginning of the study, during the actual study, or after the findings are described and published. During all phases of planning and designing this qualitative research study, I consciously prepared to address all ethical issues and concerns that might surface. It was vital that I promoted an ethical framework for the study, which built confidence in the study, the researcher, and the findings.

Summary

Phenomenological research emphasizes the individual’s subjective experience by seeking perception and meaning of a phenomenon or experience. The research method utilizing the Constructivist worldview suggests the importance of acknowledging the researcher’s knowledge bases and experiences as a reflection of the research. As noted by Mertens (2015), the researcher is intimately “interlocked in an interactive process; each influencing the other” (p.19).

Phenomenological research is distinguishable from other types of research in that the subjective experiences are at the center of the investigation by examining how the participants interpret their world and lived experiences (Mertens, 2015).

This research study, designed as a phenomenological case study, explored one primary research question: What are the experiences of first year assistant principals participating in a professional development leadership academy? Two additional questions were posed to support the exploration of the lived experience of the participants and included (a) What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning leadership academy? and (b) What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?
Understanding the first-year experiences of the assistant principalship is important for educators and administrators eager to build leadership capacity and self-efficacy in school districts. By exploring the lived experiences of these leaders, some generalizations can be made in understanding their experiences to effectively plan individualized professional learning that will promote the leadership capacity and self-efficacy of future leaders.
CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

Research Vignette

Smiles, hugs, and an easy conversation flow from the large group brought together, not by chance, but rather by their shared experiences of the past school year. They termed themselves the Survivalists, but it seems that the shared experiences, learning, and opportunities have defined them as so much more, many using a different word for their relationship: family.

This family has spent the past year together in a professional learning cohort, their School District’s Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II or SLA II for short, to promote each member’s professional growth and success.

Members of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II have gathered for their last meeting in the shadow of yet another school shooting in Florida. The smiles, hugs, and celebratory talk quickly take a serious turn when the conversation shifts to the latest school shooting in the neighboring state of Florida. It is not missed on any of the freshman administrators that this school shooting, like the rest, will hit close to home due to the proximity of the school to their district. However, the group is truly ill-prepared when the tone of the discussion morphs into a different type of awareness...one among them describes her personal anguish as it is confessed that she was a teacher in the feeder middle school and knew many of the students impacted by the devastation inflicted by Nikolas Cruz on February 14, 2018. She describes her personal heartache as details emerge from the latest school tragedy at Majory
Stoneman High School, the latest symbol of the existing mental health crisis among young people in our schools across the country.

The levity and joy that welcomed the group at the onset of the meeting quickly turns to tears, anger, and sadness at the loss of so many students and teachers — 17 students and staff members died while another 17 were injured in the deadliest school shooting in American history. While the grief seems overwhelming at times, the mantra of family remains solidly in place as discussions become even more personal with the group of school leaders.

The planned agenda for the day’s meeting of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy is temporarily derailed as talk of the latest school tragedy takes center stage with the new leaders. Courageous talk, strategic planning, and purposeful dialogue soon replace the flood of fear and anger that had previously dominated the room. These new leaders have become keenly aware that the bond formed over the past year has prepared them to tackle any conversation or situation, including the most daunting. In fact, the collective find a type of catharsis that envelops the room as confessions, fears, and testimonies are heard, but not judged.

And finally, the discussion shifts to the real purpose of the meeting, the final meeting of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy for these new assistant principals. The cohort is quick to realize they have completed a complex and challenging year filled with successes, failures, learning, and professional opportunities. Their talk centers on what they have learned and, perhaps more importantly, how much they have left to learn in order to become the leaders they want to become.

Plans to continue the rich collaboration begin with the family members and the district’s leaders. The “Survivalists” ultimately know they have done more than just survive; they have
grown and thrived in their new positions. And, finally, they can look forward to the next year after conquering this one!

The research vignette describes the closing meeting of a year-long professional learning opportunity provided to new assistant principals by one suburban school district. The professional learning program, or the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II (SLA II), provided the case setting for this phenomenological case study exploring the lived experiences of new assistant principals within a Suburban school district.

The demands for accountability and school reform from government and community entities have created a new sense of urgency among educational leaders, including those new to the field serving as assistant principal. Significant research exists documenting the importance of building-level leaders, including principals and assistant principals, in creating a strong and thriving school culture, driving school improvement, and promoting student achievement goals. While there is an abundance of research evidence supporting the need for systemic and planned professional learning opportunities for building-level principals, there is a noted absence of research regarding the need for structured learning designed for assistant principals. As such, school districts, colleges and universities, and educational agencies are left to fill in the gaps of planning scaffolded, differentiated professional learning to support the needs of new assistant principals (Matthew, 2003; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2014). As described in the Literature Review of Chapter 2, this absence of educational research describing and documenting the importance of professional learning for new assistant principals served as the precipice for this study.

In order to fully examine the lived experiences of the leaders in terms of their perceptions of professional growth and self-efficacy during the first year in the position, the study took an
interpretive approach in the form of a phenomenological case study. The Superintendent’s Leadership Academy (SLA) framed the context for the bounded system of the case study. The research design was structured to capture the voices of the participants in terms of their perceptions of their lived experiences, which provided an awareness and deeper understanding of the unique adult learning needs of new leaders. The assistant principals’ insights, including how each overcame challenges, gained confidences, and formed relationships among the group, framed a vision of the importance of professional learning support, especially in regard to leadership coaching, for the new leaders.

As described in Chapters 1 and 3, the study contains one direct research question with two subsequent questions to provide additional information to the phenomenological aspects and to frame the case study. The study sought to respond to the primary research question:

1. What are the experiences of first-year assistant principals participating in a professional learning leadership academy?

Two additional questions were designed to provide additional context to the phenomenological study and to frame the case study:

a. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

b. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

Results of the research, based on the collected data from the thirteen new assistant principals from a suburban school district, is documented in Chapter 4. Data collection included interviews, observations, field notes, and analysis of the beginning-of-the-year open-ended
survey conducted by the school district. All participants agreed to participate in the study and signed an informed consent document that described the study in detail, the responsibilities of the researcher and researched, and the conditions related to the ethical components of the participants and researcher (Appendix F). Demographic data was provided by participants on a pre-learning survey (Appendix E) and the results were charted (Appendix G) in order to provide a broader context for the study.

Participants in the study consented to a semi-structured interview process at the end of their first year in the assistant principalship and after having participated in the district’s tiered professional learning program, the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy (SLA). The SLA II tier was designed for new assistant principals to the district. All new assistant principals in the district participated in the SLA II cohort, and thirteen members were selected as participants for the study. Interviews, field notes, questionnaires, and observation notes were collected, transcribed, and coded utilizing the NVivo software to analyze the participants’ responses. The analysis produced patterns of responses that were clustered into themes through the phenomenological data reduction process. A visual representation of the data analysis process can be found in Table 4.
Summary of the Participants

As noted in Chapter 3, Miles and Huberman (1994) described the components of selecting participants and site locations for a qualitative study. This research study focused on a large suburban school district in Georgia. The school district has experienced rapid student growth during the past 15 years that has resulted in a shifting socio-economic demographic among the student population. Due to the continued population growth, the trend of leadership retirements within the district, and the addition of financial resources through a growing tax digest, the district found itself in the position to hire 24 assistant principals for the past school year.

Each of the 24 new assistant principals in the district participated in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II professional learning program that included case studies, scenario-based activities, a book study, mentoring, professional leadership coaching, and structured meetings with district representatives. Thirteen assistant principals were included in the study based on
their diverse backgrounds including previous experiences, grade levels, and years of tenure. The assistant principals included in the study were all new to the assistant principal position, and all participated in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy I cohort designed to build the capacity of outstanding teacher leaders. Participation in the Superintendent’s Leadership I cohort was an important inclusionary factor in order to promote a framework of consistent professional learning opportunities and collegiality among all study participants. One member of the SLA II cohort was not considered for participation in the study as he declined to participate in the personalized leadership coaching sessions.

The interview process included a survey for demographic information from the participants. The participants included 12 females and one male ranging in age from 29-54 years, with most participants’ ages ranging from 41-50 years old. The mean experience for the educators was 10-15 years tenure; however, the range for years of educator experience was between 9-24 years for all participants. The study participants had diverse educational histories and served in schools that include students from a diversity of backgrounds in terms of social economic and educational opportunities. Demographic information from the study participants can be found in Table 1.

**Emerging Themes**

Creswell (2013) noted the importance of the phenomenological research process where the researcher systematically classified codes into themes so that the participants’ voices, experiences, and the context of those experiences can be examined. In examining the lived experiences of first-year assistant principals, five distinctive themes emerged from the collected data sources that included interviews of the participants of the study, analysis of the pre-learning survey, and review of the researcher’s observation notes. Additionally, several sub-themes also
became apparent as a result of reviewing, winnowing (Creswell, 2014), and further aggregating the coded data.

The first theme that emerged related to the preparation of the first-year assistant principals for their new leadership role, including their prior understanding of the role of assistant principal and the influence of leadership opportunities experienced prior to their promotion. The study examined how these factors influenced the leaders’ understanding of the position and/or facilitated their preparation for the role. Theme two focused on the roles and responsibilities of the new assistant principals including sub-themes that examined duties, challenges of the assistant principalship, successes in the first-year of the assistant principalship, and the perceived impressions of the “Principal Effect,” which examined the importance of the relationship between the assistant principal and his or her principal.

The third emergent theme centered on the professional learning of the first-year assistant principals, including the experiences of participating in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy (SLA), the university certification program, and the perceived value of the SLA cohort. Theme four focused on the first-year assistant principals’ perceptions of their experiences with leadership coaching, including sub-themes describing their beliefs of the individualized professional learning process of leadership coaching, their experiences in developing their own leadership capacity through goal setting, and their reflections on their professional practice.

The fifth theme focused on the participants’ perceptions of self-efficacy through their first-year assistant principal experiences. This section also included the assistant principals’ thoughts on planning for the future and their reflections on their common lived experiences.
Theme One: Preparation for the Position

The assistant principal position has been described as crucial in today’s accountability-driven era of school reform. Understanding the responsibilities, challenges, and demands associated with the assistant principalship often surprises new leaders. These sentiments were echoed in interviews with study participants. Prior to assuming the position, most of the participants believed they had a good understanding of the requirements and demands of the job, but they also acknowledged the “totality of the job was very different than their previous assumptions.”

Sub-theme: Understanding the role.

All of the assistant principals in the study noted their disconnect in what they expected in the position and what was required once they began the new position. As noted by the participants in the district’s pre-learning survey:

- I was not anticipating how quickly the day can change. I, naively, thought I would have more control over my schedule.

- I realize in the beginning how much larger and more involved the job is than I previously thought.

- While I knew of all the duties and responsibilities assistant principals had prior to assuming the job, actually performing those roles is different. I may have ten things on my “to do” list for a day, but due to certain events coming up, I don’t get to any of those items. I have also realized that building relationships is key to working with students, teachers, and parents in this role.

- My understanding of the role has changed. I always knew that the assistant principal had a lot of roles and responsibilities, but I thought that they did not know how to
manage all of those responsibilities efficiently. Now, I realize that those many roles

• My perceptions of the assistant principal role was one who puts out fires on a daily basis as well as supports teachers and helps them to be better in the classroom. That understanding has not changed; however, its walking into a position you don’t know all the answers to that has changed the way I look at the role.

• I had no idea the amount of time this job would take. The unexpected obligations that would come up each and every day. I had ideas about being able to be out of my office and visible in the school on a regular basis. I find myself having to schedule time to get out and walk or observe. I know that I would have to be a problem-solver, but I did not know the types of issues that would come my way. From custodial issues, to facility maintenance, to bus discipline and parents, there is a lot that I just didn’t expect to have to interact with on a daily basis.

• I thought of the assistant principal as the person who kept the mechanics of the school running smoothly so the principal could focus on being the instructional leader.

Through my experiences so far and from the trainings I have received, I now see that I am charged with being an instructional leader as well. My role is to support the principal as she supports the mechanics of the school.

The study participants noted a sense of “shock,” “sadness,” and “surprise” in learning the position and stakeholder relationships associated with the position were very different than their preconceived notion. One participant explained her feelings:

I was shocked and saddened, to be honest. I really thought that I would get to spend the majority of my time in the classroom. And, I’ve realized that I have to make the
conscious effort to be in those classrooms, there is no time for that, that I have to make the time. Otherwise, I would be swamped with everything else that has to be done that teachers do not see until you’re in this position.

Common to all of the assistant principals was a sense of a broader understanding and appreciation of their experiences within the position. For the participants, a common theme emerged in the understanding that the complexity of the role would only be understood after working in the position. Several assistant principals described this effect of understanding by doing as “trial by fire” or “baptism by fire.” One participant noted:

To be honest, it was kind of trial by fire. In terms of the depth of it now [the assistant principalship] and the amount of support needed and the amount of parent conferences and discussions with parents and trying to support parents and students, it has been a challenge because that is the stuff that you don’t see in the classroom, and then you’re like… “Oh hey, here’s this kid who’s going to an in-patient facility multiple times through the year; how are you going to support them? And, how are you going to get them where they need to be?” I was not ready for that.

Another assistant principal noted a sentiment that was echoed by others in how the experience “by fire” was necessary in the learning process. The participant explained, “My learning is probably a combination of everything. Mostly baptism by fire, though. I think that I learn better through experience. If I do it once, I’ll retain it.”

Yet another assistant principal voiced the sentiment of the importance of experiencing the position as the best way to prepare for the role:

You go to school. You learn. We had our leadership class. You can shadow someone, which is what I did last year. I asked to shadow…things like that. But, until you’re in it,
there’s no way of learning. It is experience, which was really hard for me at the beginning, because I wanted to know, and I wanted the manual. But, it honestly is all about the experience. And, I have to remind myself it’s just like that first year of teaching. You go in and you’re going to do all these things. And, then you go home after a tough week and cry, because you realize it’s not going to happen that way.

And another participant shared a similar viewpoint of the necessity of “living the experience.” The participant noted:

I think, for me, the best way I learn is by doing. So, even though I shadowed another leader for a couple of days to watch her, I need to be in it, and live it, and feel it, and touch it, and breathe it, before it becomes who I am, and I make it my own.

The study participants noted a sense of “survival” and pride in their own accomplishments as they reflect on the year of learning. Many participants voiced the value in the learning experience while also acknowledging the process is far from over. One assistant principal stated:

And so, I really felt like, just recently, like in January or February, I’ve really felt like I am in this position because I can make the decisions, and I can listen and give feedback. I found a little bit better balance. And, I’ve got a better handle on our discipline, I know what to do, I know what suggestions to give the teachers. And then moving forward, I can just see myself anticipating and owning these behaviors.

While the learning curve for the assistant principals was steep, most acknowledged that it was necessary and respected among staff, students, and parents. One participant noted:

I feel like I’ve been pretty honest with people in saying, “I don’t know” if they come and ask me a question, which is hard to do when I’m supposed to be the one that they come
to. It is hard for me to say, “Well, I don’t know. Let me look into that and get back to you,” but I’ve done that purposely, not trying to act like I know stuff I don’t know.

Another assistant principal resonated the sentiment and noted:

They [the staff] all know I’m in school. They all know I’m learning. That hasn’t been as hard for me as I thought it could be, telling them I don’t know, but I don’t want to have to keep saying that. I want to know. I want to be able to know. I want them to feel like they can come to me, and I can give them what they need.

A third participant voiced her perception as follows:

I have given them what they [the teachers] needed this year, but I’ve had to go and ask for help more than I typically have to ask for help. More than I’m used to having to do because I felt like I knew what I was doing before, and this year…I’ve been learning again.

A fourth participant described the learning process as follows:

Somewhere way back at the beginning of all this, I remember somebody in one of my classes saying, “You just have to tell people when you don’t know.” That stuck with me, but I didn’t want to come in and act like I knew everything, because I don’t at all.

Another participant summarized the general feelings of the group by saying: “I spent this year learning for me, but I am looking forward to turning that learning into something for teachers.”

The participants largely had a strong sense of self-awareness and positional awareness in understanding and acknowledging the learning process required in their new position. Many of the participants credited the support of the professional learning network, the Superintendent’s
Leadership Academy, in sharpening their awareness and promoting a greater understanding of
the degree of operational understanding needed to be successful.

Sub-theme: Leadership opportunities.

The study participants noted varying degrees of leadership type opportunities that were available prior to the start of their assistant principalship. Assistant principals who had prior experiences noted the intentional investment of their previous building-level leaders in promoting their growth through mentoring or providing guided learning opportunities. These experiences did not provide a well-defined understanding of the role of assistant principal but did afford the leaders with an insight into some of the many types of responsibilities that the position holds. One participant noted:

My previous principal was very knowledgeable. He allowed me to come in and work on master scheduling with them [the leadership team]. They allowed me to come in and do some of the extra-curricular observations. They asked my opinion on a lot of things, so I felt like I was prepared just with them including me on a lot of the day-to-day things that you needed for the school.

While this type of inclusion into the world of building-level leadership was valuable and appreciated, the participant acknowledged that she still faced many challenges in her new role. The participant stated, “It was very beneficial [having these experiences], but I was still overwhelmed with just…discipline and how frequently those type things were coming.”

Another participant noted that having a summer school leadership experience had supported his understanding of students who struggle academically, but he was still not fully prepared for the totality of the position. The participant noted:
Working summer school last year definitely helped to expose me to those kids [that struggle academically] and those challenges, but in terms of the depth of it now and the amount of support that they need and the amount of parent conferences and discussions with parents and trying to support the parents…it’s been a challenge.

Many of the participants in the study noted experience as grade-level or department-level leadership, which did support their transition into the assistant principalship. The experience of leading other teachers did provide the participants with some insight into their role of administratively leading others. One participant noted:

[After serving as the department head, and some of the people that I worked for that were APs at the time, gave me a lot of opportunities to learn their role. I guess they saw that was the path that I was heading down and then as a [Special Education] facilitator being able to see things from a more global perspective helps because as a teacher you only see what matters to your class and your students.]

The general consensus among the participants noted an appreciation for former leaders and supervisors who had provided them with opportunities to explore their leadership by guiding them through supported leadership experiences. Those leadership experiences seemed to promote a small sense of self-efficacy or awareness of a leader’s role as assistant principal rather than providing them with concrete skills or resources needed to be effective assistant principals. As summarized by one participant:

I think going into the assistant principalship, I maybe had these preconceived notions of what it would be like, and I think I had a lot of experiences that led me to those. Some of them were true, and then others not so much. Like for instance, discipline, right? I don’t think I realized what a big part of my job that would be. I’m just being completely
honest. As far as being an instruction leader in the building, like the magnitude of what that meant. I had some previous roles as a teacher being able to be a teacher-leader in the building where I did work with grade levels and collecting data and helping teachers to improve, but I feel like jumping into the administrator role, it’s such a much more broad picture. Just understanding, okay, if you have a problem, I have a problem. If your kids aren’t succeeding in this classroom, that’s my problem too. What are we going to do to solve that? And having the bandwidth to do that with all the day-to-day operational stuff too.

The participants all felt accomplished in finishing the year with more knowledge, experiences, and understanding. None of the participants expressed that they approached their new position with the notion that they had an in-depth understanding of the requirements and expectations needed to be completely successful. As the first year closed, most of the participants had a sense of excitement and pride in “surviving” the challenging first year. There were also sentiments of anticipation from the participants, including many planning for the future. Many of the assistant principals shared a common perspective of excitement, expectation, and challenge. As noted by one participant:

I guess I would say that it was a challenging [year]. I was nervous, yet excited. It was rewarding and challenging all at the same time. I guess I felt that I’ve learned a lot about myself over the course of the first year. Learning about new things, how to learn about new things, being open and flexible, learning that you may have a list of “to do” things, but they might not get done, learning how to be organized. There was much more to being an assistant principal than I guess I came in thinking.
Theme Two: Roles and Responsibilities

Under Theme Two: Roles and Responsibilities, several distinctive subthemes emerged, including an explanation of the job duties, the challenges of the position, the successes for the year, and the impact of the “Principal Effect. During the interview process, all participants noted the expansiveness of their roles and responsibilities, their challenges, and their successes; however, many also noted the intentionality of their principal’s work in regarding their own leadership capacity. The participants were quick to acknowledge those principals who were focused on building their instructional leadership capacity, and some were open about the opposite effect when the principal-assistant principal relationship was corrupted. As a result, the “Principal Effect” became a subtheme of the analysis.

Sub-theme: Duties.

Many common responsibilities emerged in interviews with the participants of this study, including revelations of what researchers have noted as rote, managerial duties such as enforcing school rules, providing supervision, and managing conflicts. Common responsibilities of the assistant principals who participated in the study included discipline, teacher evaluations, and supervision of extra-curricular or after-school activities. Additionally, all participants noted some other managerial type of responsibilities including book distribution, maintenance requests, custodial supervision, key accountability, locker distribution, and/or supervision of clubs or activities.

One assistant principal noted a sentiment that was shared by all of the other participants, suggesting that while many of her assigned duties were something that she “had to do” (discipline, transportation, and evaluations), the real work of the assistant principal is a sense of a
greater responsibility that was intrinsic in her understanding of her position, including her work as an instructional leader. The participant noted:

And then, of course, at the beginning I was given the little bullets of, here’s your responsibilities. At this point, yet, there’s some things I have to do like discipline, but there’s also the parents. [I have] certain things I have to do, but I feel like my job is to keep this place moving in the direction it should be with a positive outlook and spreading the right word.

For most of the assistant principals, the learning curve associated with their new duties was challenging. One participant stated:

It’s been really hard for me. One, to stay in my lane, and two, to figure out where my lane is. Because I do have specific job responsibilities that are my priority, but it all contributes to a bigger picture, so it is hard to know everything else that everyone else is doing. And, it’s simply isn’t possible to learn [the roles and responsibilities of the position] all at once, it takes time, so I’ve had to learn to be patient with myself.

Another assistant principal noted that in addition to his “traditional” or “expected” assistant principal duties, his work included a curriculum focus that was unexpected. The leader reflected:

As far as duties are concerned, it’s transportation, the whole CTAE department, and Foreign Language. The security, the buses, and the transportation, the nuts and bolts of things, I do all of that, but the curriculum pieces and being involved with the world languages are different. I have never done anything like that before, but we have great departments and while it was intimidating…it’s been phenomenal.
Also common to the assistant principals was their understanding of the importance of their role as an instructional leader. The assistant principals acknowledged the importance that the school district has placed on the role of instructional leadership with principals and assistant principals. One leader noted, “I have several duties including ExP (tutoring), After-School Program, buses, field trips, discipline. First and foremost, though, instruction in curriculum and instructional leadership.”

During the interview process, the district’s systemic emphasis on the importance of instructional leadership has penetrated the ranks of the new assistant principals. As noted by one, but echoed by all assistant principals, the most important duty was their responsibility to the students and teachers in the classroom. One participant stated:

I think the most rewarding part for me this year has definitely been in the classrooms, watching teachers, and watching students. So scheduling time with teachers in classrooms, conversations, professional development first because really I feel like I wouldn’t be as effective with everything else if I didn’t spend my time there, in instructional leadership.

Another assistant principal also noted the importance of her classroom time and how she balanced the “other” (more managerial type duties, discipline) to serve her teachers in the classroom. She described her perceptions:

There were referrals on my desk, or if there was a parent that called, or there was a meeting that I needed to go to…these things interfere with how much time I was actually trying to spend out in the classrooms because I wanted students to know who I was. And to see what the teachers were doing so I could get to know them and to help them was important.
**Sub-theme: Challenges.**

As noted by researchers including Armstrong (2010) and Marshall and Hooley (2006), assistant principals often find themselves in a hectic, challenging, and fragmented working situation. Common to all but one of the assistant principals was the sense of being overwhelmed by the complexity of their new position. One assistant principal noted, “I wish I would’ve known how difficult it can be to deal with the big challenges.” Several of the assistant principals admitted that the biggest challenges were admitting that the assistant principal position was very different than their preconceived understanding of the role. One noted:

> I was told I lived in a bubble, and I thought, and I assumed, and I expected everyone to work as hard as I felt like you should work. Yes, I was very shocked and disappointed to find out that everyone doesn’t put in 110%.

Another assistant principal noted the struggle with her preconceived notion of the position:

> Well, when I started thinking about being an administrator, it was really about that I want to get in. I want to support teachers. I want to do all this great, wonderful stuff, get into their classrooms, listen to their feedback. That was kind of my mindset. I was ready to go, ready to take charge. Then, getting in here, I realized there’s just a lot of stuff that I had no idea that I would be responsible for.

A third assistant principal echoed her lack of job awareness:

> This job gave me a healthy appreciation that I don’t know everything. Which, I already knew but…I definitely appreciate more all it takes to run a building, especially a Title I school. And, in addition to that, it allowed me an opportunity to practice collaborating,
communicating, with so many different pieces of learning a building. It was extremely informative; this year has been.

And, yet another described her sense of feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the position:

That whole idea of getting in and walking down the hallways and popping in classrooms, I was able to do that like the first two weeks of school. Then, it was all of a sudden, here are some (student) behaviors, and behaviors that I have never experienced in my own classroom. I didn’t know how to deal with, didn’t know what to do with…Then, it became, “How do I support my teachers there?” because I have kids in the classroom that are acting out in ways that I have never experienced as a classroom teacher.

Another assistant principal described her perceptions of surprise in the lack of effort and dedication of some staff members for whom she was responsible in supervising:

As a classroom teacher, I don’t want to say you’re not aware, but you don’t realize that, wow, not everyone is doing what I’m doing. So, getting out there and seeing. Observing teachers and then providing feedback. Providing feedback in such a way that they’re open to hearing it.

Several others discussed the difficulties of shifting their responsibilities from teaching children to adult learning. The participant noted, “Adult learning is very different than anything I am used to…” Yet another assistant principal concurred with the difficulties associated with working with adults. She stated:

I never realized the challenge of motivating people who don’t know how to follow, lack skills, and resources. So that has challenged me to dig deep and reevaluate how I
motivate people, how do I lead people in the direction that they need to go, when they
don’t even know they need to go in that direction.

As noted in the research literature, the study participants found the assistant principal
position to be complex, hectic, and inconsistent from school to school. The participants in the
study echoed the sentiments and feelings described early in the process; however, their
perceptions evolved somewhat quickly over the course of the year. As will be discussed in detail
in Theme Three: Professional Learning and Growth, the participants credited the structured
professional learning supports of the SLA as a factor in their ability to find success in their roles.

Sub-theme: Successes.

Three common perspectives emerged from the participants of the study: the professional
growth of the participants; the importance of their ability to build and sustain relationships with
students, staff, and parents; and their ability to understand their position better by understanding
a “big picture” perspective. Success for each of the study participants included feelings of
personal growth in their position as they had a better understanding of their responsibilities and
abilities in accomplishing the job at hand. One participant noted:

I feel that I have grown as a leader. I’ve figured out more of what it takes to be a leader.
I had to ask myself what does it take to gain the trust of the people around me. How can I
really help them, because there are ways that I thought I was helping, but maybe there are
grander ways that I can help them. What can I do to make their workload lighter, but
encourage them to give more at the same time? These are questions that I keep asking
myself to push me to be a better leader.

Another participant noted that she found that she evolved into a more confident person
based on her abilities:
I’ve really felt like I am in the position because I can make the decisions, and I can listen to feedback. I have found a little bit of a better balance. And, I’ve got a better handle on the menial tasks including discipline. Now, I know what to do. I know what suggestions to give the teachers. And then moving forward, I can just see myself anticipating and owning these behaviors.

Yet another participant described the initial struggle of adapting to the role of an assistant principal but noted that she found her success in understanding more of who she was a leader and her position as a member of the leadership team. She noted:

I think towards the end of the year, I kind of found my voice a little bit. That part was the hardest part. Just trying to express myself so that I wouldn’t be taken the wrong way. But learning to communicate so that my comments would be valued was a thing that I kind of had to work on, being about to express myself that way. It has taken a long time to get there and be able to say certain things and feel comfortable saying it. In fact, I may have taken communication differently. I am also better prepared for the feedback that I may receive. In the beginning, I don’t know if I was ready for feedback yet.

A fourth participant noted that she felt that she was “owning the position” and that provided the sense that she would continue to find more success. The participant noted, “I feel like I’m owning all of it. I am owing the position. I have built my schedules, I have my teachers in place. And, I feel really good about that and about where I am.”

For many of the participants, the idea of understanding their role and “finding a voice” was one of their major accomplishments. While more confident in their abilities, many of the assistant principals noted they were only beginning the learning process. One participant described a more reserved approach to her success, noting:
I think I have learned a whole lot of new stuff. I wouldn’t say that I’m hugely successful in any area yet, because I am still learning. I think that we’ve gotten through the year, and everybody seems happy, and the teachers all seem happy and parents aren’t fleeing the ship. Nobody’s leaving. Nobody’s running away screaming. I think that it has been a good year. I’ve heard several teachers say that they feel that we have done a good job and have made a positive impact on the school. Parents, in general, feel that we have made a difference this year.

A theme among the new leaders was of a type of understanding that they did not have prior to assuming the role of an assistant principal, a better understanding of the “big picture”, whether that expanded view or understanding is of the district or the position of assistant principal. One participated described this greater understanding:

For success for myself, I have to note how far I’ve grown and how I look at things so differently than I have. Really seeing. I thought that I understood or saw the big picture, but it’s like…Someone may have said something in one of our classes, about the aerial view, how you go higher and higher [in an organization] and you see more and more. So, that for myself is a success, and wow! I’ve learned more! I’ve grown more as a person: professionally and personally.

Another assistant principal noted her perspective in gaining a different view of her position:

It’s been really hard for me [learning my position] because I do have specific job responsibilities that are my priority, but it all contributes to a bigger picture, so it’s hard not to know everything else that everyone else is doing.
Throughout the interview process, the most prevalent reflection on the successes of the first year in the assistant principal role focused on each leader’s ability to build or improve relationships. Common among the participants was the value placed on the importance of developing and growing relationships with students, staff, and parents. Many called the ability to cultivate positive relationships the most important responsibility of the position. One participant noted:

I feel that being an assistant principal, if I don’t build a relationship, then I feel like I have not built a solid foundation in which to do anything that I want to do as an assistant principal. I don’t feel like there’s a vision I’ll be able to have or be able to [gain] the buy-in from the teachers that I’m working with to assist me in making that vision be realized [without relationship building]. I just don’t think it will happen without first building great relationships.

A second participant echoed the sentiment of the importance of developing strong relationships in building the capacity and functionality of her administrative team:

I would say that my major success would be helping create a strong administration, administrative team. That was my first major success, because by doing that, it allowed us, as a team, to support teachers. That’s been also a huge success, teachers feeling supported. Part of learning your job is learning your teachers…building relationships. So, ultimately building relationships and building strong teams has been my biggest success.

Another assistant principal noted the important and conscious effort placed on relationship building:
That’s something I was very conscious of initially, that I really wanted to come in and really, right off the bat, kind of build and maintain positive relationships and establish those because, I mean, honestly, I’m very young and I feel like initially there was some hesitation about me. Some of the thoughts like, “Why is she telling me what to do?” and the like. Even with parents, I tried really hard to be out front at the car rider line and out in the lunchroom and out and about so that people would get to know me better. I think that really helped build trust and kind to establish some credibility for me. I think it also helps when I’ve had to have some sort of courageous conversation with teachers about performance or evaluations because that was something that was very new for me and almost eye-opening.

A fourth assistant principal concurred that her biggest success was building relationships or “connections” with the students in her school, noting that the students feel they have an advocate in her. The participant reflected:

The connection with the kids is my biggest success. I feel like the students are my success. I’m visible. I’m out in the hall all the time. I know kids by name. They know me. They know they can come to me for whatever whether it’s they have forgot their lunch and I’ve got Ramen Noodles for them or they just need someone to vent to or tell me what they did over the weekend. I feel like I’ve made a strong connection with the kids and that was my goal because I think some of our kids here, it’s a growing population of diversity. I think a lot of them come from families that don’t have the support or structure or family environment. They know I truly care about them. Being there for those kids that need that support is pretty important to me.
Sub-theme: The “Principal Effect”.

As noted by researchers (Austin & Brown, 1970; Gorton, 1987; Kaplan & Owings, 1999), the relationship developed between assistant principals and the principal is a crucial factor in the success of the assistant principals. Hartzell et al. (1995) insisted further that assistant principals must assume an initiative position in promoting his or her influence and position within the school by building a collaborative and thriving relationship with the building-level leader.

In ten of the thirteen participants, the relationship between the principal and participant was well-developed, healthy, and thriving. In these relationships, the assistant principal felt valuable and valued by the staff and, more importantly, by the principal as a crucial factor in the school’s success. The assistant principals used terms including: trusted, important, respected, and appreciated to describe the relationship between themselves and their principals. One assistant principal summarized her feelings by noting:

I learn much better by experience. That’s why I love when [my principal] allows me to sit in on something because I learn how he’s dealing with it, whether it’s an angry parent or one employee saying this. Let’s sit here and hash it out together. Learning that, watching that, and taking notes on his questioning style is really important because he does it in a very smooth way where it’s almost like coaching them to the answer, they come up with the answer, they come up with the answer and okay, so this is what you said. That transparency is exciting.

Another assistant principal noted the importance of her principal’s strong support of her even though the principal had her own learning curve serving as the new leader of the school. The participant noted:
I think we’ve all grown a lot and evolved this year in our roles. [My principal] has been so good. My principal’s been so good about when she’s learning something, she’ll call me in and say, “Hey, come here. You need to look at this. You need to see how I’m doing this.” She’s been really good at including me, and I don’t feel like I have to not ask her questions or not go to her with stuff. She’s just very open and that’s been a benefit this year.

However, three participants noted frustration and in some cases anger with the lack of a healthy, productive professional relationship with the principal. Two of the three participants were in the same school location. One of the participants noted the difficulty of establishing a healthy relationship with her principal noting she often felt “patronized” and “dismissed.” The participant further explained that she felt that her principal had issues specifically regarding her gender, and she noted a lack of gender equity on her team. The lack of a healthy, respected relationship left her feeling “out of place” and “disappointed.” The assistant principal noted that she felt the comradery between her fellow assistant principals was her “saving grace,” but she spent many days frustrated and often left school in tears. She noted further, “When I look back on this year, the only thing I have learned from our principal is how not to be as a leader.”

The sentiment was echoed by a second participant at the same school and of the same gender. The participant noted that she felt “held back and not allowed to effectively lead.” The participant noted further:

I love being an assistant principal, but my successes have been despite our principal not because of him or in collaboration with him. That to me is very sad.
Both participants noted the announced retirement of the school principal was “welcomed news,” and they were looking forward to the successor. One of the participants noted, “We have been looking for someone to lead us.”

The third participant seemed more reluctant to expand upon her relationship with the building principal even though she did categorize the partnership as “needing work”. The participant noted, “It is hard to know what I should know and how much I should be doing because I don’t always get the most timely or productive feedback. I must assume some of the ownership in the relationship, so it is something that I am working to improve.”

Theme Three: Professional Learning and Growth

The participants in the study echoed much of the research literature focused on the professional learning of assistant principals. As noted by researchers (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Levine, 2005; Read, 2012), the participants described a lack of preparation by traditional leadership pre-service programs.

The assistant principal participants involved in this study were past members of the first Superintendent’s Leadership Academy (SLA I) designed for high-capacity teacher leaders. All participants also were members of the second Superintendent’s Leadership Academy (SLAII) cohort intended for first-year assistant principals. According to the design framework, the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy’s purpose is to build the leadership capacity of teacher-leaders, assistant principals, and principals. The SLA design includes training through skill-development and practice, structured feedback, experiential learning in leadership concepts, and training through formal personal growth experiences including individualized leadership coaching.
Prior to the start of the SLA II cohort, the participants were asked to give their perspectives on effective professional learning in the District’s pre-learning survey. Each of the participants noted similar responses regarding the need for practical, job-embedded, and scenario-based learning. In the district’s pre-learning survey, the participants noted:

- The best professional learning is hands on, not sit-and-get. I need to be able to practice the concepts.
- I hope to gain a deeper understanding of district policies and procedures: how to best support teachers and create a positive school culture.
- I learn best from practical, hands-on learning that I can take back to my school and apply effectively.
- I need learning that is job-embedded and designed to improve my leadership style, but also impacts teacher performance and, therefore, student learning.
- I would love to have more development on how to deal with certain situations that come up. So far, I have had several “firsts” this year. Having the opportunity to work through these situations and hone my communications skills would be very beneficial.
- I would love more guidance on how to manage teachers, how to provide effective feedback, how to talk to them about a parent complaint, and how to guide them “off the ledge” when things become overwhelming.
- I would rather hear people’s experiences and share stories. I would like to see more role-playing and scenarios. I think the best professional learning was when I was able to shadow and administrator for more than one day.
• The best learning occurs when presented with scenarios and how they were handled. I need answers but know sometimes the answers don’t present themselves until you are in the situations.

• Effective professional learning is relevant and meaningful to what we face. Instead of theory and design, it is designed around what leaders actually face on a day-to-day basis. Not a 500 mile view [of things] but, what is expected day-in and day-out.

• Effective professional learning is relevant to the current situation. It is based on best practices and uses real-life examples. I also believe effective professional learning allows for discussion and time to ask questions.

**Sub-theme: Superintendent’s Leadership Academy.**

Through the structured supports provided by the profession learning opportunities of the school district, the participants were all grouped in a cohort in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy. Additionally, as a requirement of the new tiered state certification process, the participants were also grouped in a collective college cohort. Common among the participants was their understanding for the need of professional learning opportunities and the appreciation for these options. As noted by one participant:

Even though, yes, I’m knowledgeable, and yes, I’ve support teachers as a lead teacher and as a facilitator, I still need, as a human being, I still need support working through difficult situations. So, it’s just kind of shown me that I don’t always…I’m not always on top of things. That sometimes I need [support]. And, sometimes, it’s better to have someone talk to you about ways to work through things.

Another participant echoed her appreciation of the learning process. She described her experience:
Every one of those classes was wonderful, and I enjoyed…It was like, I would go to them and I would go home and just think about it for two or three days about everything that had been said and what I’d learned, meeting all the different people in the county, having the different departments of the county come and talk to us about what they did. So just all that. I think I was just ready for something new, and all that new knowledge that I was gaining was so fun and informative.

The opportunity to join the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy and the college-tiered certification cohort provided the assistant principals with a collaborative and supportive network of peers. One participant explained her feelings of pulling “her people” in for support when needed:

So, being proactive in heading things up, and that was kind of my strategy, was pulling my people in. Pulling my resources and saying, “Okay. I don’t know how to deal with this. I need some suggestions.”

Another participant agreed with the notion of the importance of the practical learning of the SLA II process and the network of colleagues to support her needs. She described her viewpoint:

Learning needs to be practice, hands-on. You’ve got to be in it when you’re learning it. I think that’s why SLA classes have been so good. It’s because I needed what I was learning while I was doing it. It’s not like I learned it, and then 5 years later I going to get a different job. I was doing it in practice.

Yet another participant noted her thoughts on the value of participating in the SLA: SLA II just started to help me with working with the people that are in the same position that I am, giving, helping me grow because there were other people there in the same
situation that I was. So being able to reflect with them, start to look at other things that we are going to face as leaders. Having that core group to continue to work with, and to get feedback from, and ask the questions of how did you handle this. I have these other peers that are doing the same thing, and I could just ask them and lean on them to get another perspective to help me make the best decision and to do things well.

Study participants noted another benefit of participation in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy included the opportunity to view the assistant principalship within a larger vision of the district. One participant noted:

In SLA I, I thought that it gave me an opportunity to look at leadership in the big picture. Because when you’re in the classroom, the focus is very, very narrow. It’s all about, well, I’m gonna do this for my kids. And, in SLA II, I had an opportunity to learn about all the parts that come together that make this school work. [It is] not just the teachers [that] makes it work, but all the things that go with that, and what makes a school system function, and how every leadership role that there is, how it plays to make it function well.

Another participant concurred and described her perception of participating in the leadership academy:

So, it gave me a broader view, and so my lens had to start to change. So that I could see effectiveness changes as you enter different roles. And so, you have to look at, when you start making decisions as a leader, you have to look at how well does that affect all of those things. It gave me a different focus.

A third participant echoed the general consensus of the assistant principals by describing her thoughts as:
Well, certainly SLA I had prepared me for some of the general and larger picture items. But, then coming in and living the day-to-day kind of stuff. There were times when I wanted to be proactive and get information before it landed. Before I landed in a situation where I didn’t know what to do. So, those were the things I took my time in kind of asking, trusted resources and then talking with SLA II candidates currently with me. What their experiences have been like.

One other assistant principal described the importance of connecting and collaborating. She stated:

I’ll be honest too, just the opportunity especially in SLA II, having the opportunity to just kind of connect with other first year APs and be like, “Okay, I had this come up. Have you had this come up? What is going on?” That was really, really, really powerful. Having someone actually walk me through it, not kind of getting the information second hand, was really powerful.

Yet another participant summarized her thoughts on participating in the leadership academy noting, “Through SLA II and through all of the coaching sessions, and through all of the transparency, I feel valuable at the end of it all.”

**Sub-theme: College program cohort.**

Due to requirement changes by the state certification system, the Professional Standards Commission, all of the participants were required to gain their Tier I Leadership Certification. The participants elected to participate in a pilot college cohort program offered by a local university partner. The college cohort experience provided additional opportunities for the participants to collaborate. Each of the SLA II participants elected to remain in their SLA II cohort and to participant in the college certification process, which met at a location within the
district. The study participants noted the importance of the continued collaboration of peers established in the SLA II grouping. One participant noted:

Well, being in the cohort, what’s nice about it is we have a group of folks I can call. It gives us an avenue to vent out frustrations, but it also gives us another person to ask for a solution. [My peers] call me all the time about Canvas issues, and I’m calling someone about RTI [Response to Intervention] because she deals with it more than I do and checking in with others for scheduling and how to pull information out of ASPEN.

That’s great, having a team outside that’s not my internal team.

Several other of the assistant principals noted the importance of the relationship building among the peers. One included:

And so, to have some of those relationships has been wonderful. And, for me, that’s the only time I get to see other assistant principals, besides maybe a county meeting here or there, but we don’t really get to talk a whole lot. So, for me, it’s been extremely beneficial, because otherwise I would have been even more isolated this year.

The importance of the cohort was a common theme among the assistant principals. As noted by a participant:

The [cohort] was so valuable to me. I’ll be honest, we still email and communicate with each other about even silly things sometimes, but maybe you don’t want to call the county to ask about this…you know? You don’t want to call and say, “I cannot find this ASP on the internet.” But, you can call your buddy or something, so we still kind of network and collaborate.

Another participant noted the importance of building a peer network that extends outside of the school building. The participant noted:
My team extends beyond just what’s in this building. So, it’s allowed me to establish a cohort. Which is beneficial, moving forward in future years. Because who knows when, or maybe if, I’ll have to work with other people in the district.

In summary, one of the participants noted:

I feel like having the SLA and college program experience kind of expedited that process of everyone getting to know each other. But, it’s done in an appropriate way so that our outlook on our positions are positive. I always have been concerned with the impact of allowing people to get into negative self-talk. So, when you do SLA, you have people there, like yourself, or other people from the district who are sharing the expectations and visions so it’s much more healthy to have a structure to having all of us together.

As a clear reflection of the participants, through the networked relationships established in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy and through the shared experiences of the college cohort, this group of new experience principals found fellowship, companionship, and a shared story.

**Theme Four: Leadership Coaching**

The emergence of leadership coaching for educators in the early 2000s has influenced progressive professional learning. Leadership coaching derives from an understanding of the professional learning needs of adults and includes social-emotional learning and the diverse needs of educational leaders.

As part of the redesigned Superintendent’s Leadership Academy all participants of the SLA II cohort planned for first-year assistant principals, were provided with trained, certified leadership coaches. Each of the assistant principals, who were members of the SLA II cohort,
accepted the District’s offer for leadership coaching with the exception of one new middle school leader. The other 23 members of the cohort were assigned a professional leadership coach.

Coaching sessions began in January during the second semester of the school year. Each of the leadership coaches was certified through an accredited program. The leadership coaches collaborated through regularly planned meetings to discuss appropriate coaching strategies designed to promote consistency in the coaching experiences for all participants. Each of the assistant principals participated in at least six individualized coaching sessions strategically focused on goal setting, personalized development, and reflective practices for the leaders.

Based on the pre-learning survey conducted by the School District, the participants’ understanding and past experiences with leadership coaching were extremely limited. One participant noted, “I have very little knowledge [of leadership coaching]. I’ve known friends who have used life coaches before, but I’ve never thought about leadership coaching.” The sentiment was common among many of the participants. Half of the participants acknowledged their lack of understanding of their role in participating in the coaching sessions. In response to the district’s pre-learning survey, the participants noted:

- I have limited knowledge of coaching.
- I don’t know what I know about coaching-I would expect honest feedback so that I can improve in all aspects of leadership.
- I know no knowledge of leadership coaching.
- I have zero knowledge of leadership coaching.
- I have none [experience with leadership coaching].
- I do not know much about leadership coaching. I would assume it is similar to a mentor situation, but with a person who is not necessarily in the same position.
While many of the study participants had very little understanding of leadership coaching, several other participants seemed to have some generalized understanding of the role. These participants summarized their understanding of leadership coaching with the following statements:

- I would expect leadership coaching to be customized to meet my individual needs and to further grow me as an effective and strong leader.
- I have moderate knowledge of leadership coaching. I was coached by someone at the end of last year for about a month. The approach she took was that she asked a lot of questions, and my answers drove the conversation and the goals I ended up setting.
- I think through leadership coaching I will have the opportunity to better understand myself as a leader. It will help me to realize my strengths as well as areas I need to work on. I would hope to have a coach who could guide me and provide meaningful feedback.
- I am looking to improve on my weaknesses as a leader and grow and for it to have a positive impact on my career.
- That it is a reflective, individualized process.
- Leadership coaching is a means to engage leaders in reflection, goal setting, and development of action steps to meet those goals.
- Helping those in leadership positions identify their true strengths and work through their difficulties. Making meaningful observations of abilities and growth statements that can be applied to life.
- I think having a leadership coach will help me grow as a leader by giving me another person to refer to with questions. It will also give me another leader, with another leadership style, to observe and learn from.
One participant summarized her generalized feelings of her new position and her lack of confidence in the role with the hope associated with her understanding of leadership coaching. The participant noted that her understanding of a leadership coach was the following:

Someone that will help me to learn and understand the things I don’t know yet. I was used to being a rockstar teacher and felt confident in my role as teacher leader. Making the move to this position has changed that somewhat. There’s so much to learn and I want to restore that faith in myself and my abilities.

Leadership coaching was new to most of the study participants, although one assistant principal noted that she had some minimal past experience with leadership coaching. Through the interview process, each participant noted a strong benefit from the coaching experience. Three sub-themes emerged during the study, including the individualized nature of coaching as a tool of professional learning, the participants’ feelings of goal attainment as a result of the coaching sessions, and the reflective benefits for the leaders from participating in leadership coaching.

**Sub-theme: Individualized learning process.**

Common to many of the participants was the reflection of the coaching experience as an individualized professional learning experience. One participant noted that her leadership coaching experiences were “All about me,” and it was refreshing. She noted that she initially felt “selfish” in taking time to focus on her needs for professional learning. Another participant noted her initial thoughts on the process:

Okay, I’ll be honest. When I was first approached about it, my perception of it initially, before we began *the coaching sessions*, was that it would be formal. It would be very formal and there would maybe be formal questions and, I don’t mean this wrong, but it
would almost be like checking boxes. I’ll be honest, it’s probably the biggest professional growth piece that I’ve had just because, as awesome as SLA was, and as great as that is, it’s nice to have that individualized attention where I could kind of say, okay, this is what’s on my mind and this is maybe a situation that I’m struggling with right now and I don’t know how to deal with this particular student or teacher or I’m having a conflict and it was time where, I’ll be honest, I try to take the time to reflect, right? That’s part of being a good leader is reflecting, but I felt like the coaching cycles really gave me an opportunity to talk it out.

Yet another leader summarized her coaching experience by describing how the session allowed a sense of growing confidence in her abilities. The leader noted:

I’ll talk about the coaching for a minute. There were moments where I really questioned myself this year, and just by my coach asking me questions, not necessarily giving an opinion, just asking me questions, it made me realize I should probably be more confident in that area, that big picture. I was taking on some things that I probably shouldn’t have been taking on or feeling responsible for certain things that simply weren’t my responsibility. So, in that aspect, [coaching was] extremely beneficial.

For some of the leaders, having an individual solely focused on their growth was the most impactful realization during the leadership coaching sessions. One leader noted the following:

I think the biggest part, and I know this, and I’ve heard it from some of the other candidates, is the fact that our coaches spent time just with us. Some one-on-one time, and just let us talk. And, it wasn’t a guidance, like we’re telling you what to do like a mentor. It was coaching where there was talk and getting things out and let’s see reflections and having someone to talk about that with. Because, I think we all try to
have someone we talk to and help us reflect, but those people are not in the position to really help us reflect. I go home and talk to my husband, but he’s not really in that position.

Another leader further noted the importance of having an “outside voice” to provide a context of school situations and professional learning. For the participant, coaching was important in providing a secondary prospective that validated her feelings. The participant stated:

For me, being an outsider and not growing up in this [district], not going through the [district] schools, I don’t have that [connection]. Having somebody outside of that that I can commiserate with has been kind of nice to talk to, but he’s been awesome in terms that I have not ever had a professional coach, to have somebody not just give me the answer, just be like, “Well, what do you think”…Pulling it out of me and giving me the space to reflect and figure out where I need to grow has been nice.

Yet another reflection noted the significance of having an “outside” person to provide perspective to “inside the building” issues. The participant noted:

It was really helpful. One of the things was that everything was confidential. This is somebody who is not in my building, somebody I don’t see every day. I fell into a great position with my colleagues, and I can go to them. But, my coach was so great. There were things that we talked about that I didn’t necessarily share with the principal because a lot of it actually had to do with the faculty.

A fourth reflection of the importance of coaching from one participant stressed the value of leadership coaching in the organization of the leader’s thoughts and emotions. The participant stated:
I don’t know if you could say that maybe my brain thinks through things better. Or, I feel like I have support, or I’m able to get support when I’m stuck on finding a solution to a problem. And, in a job, or I’m in this position where it’s easy to get overwhelmed, it is nice to have…It’s almost like having someone help you organize your thoughts. And, in doing so, it ultimately, it’s naturally motivating when you can weed through all of the…I guess you would call it stressors, or all of the tasks, that you are trying to accomplish day-to-day. And it helps you refocus. It helps me refocus on why I’m in this job to begin with, on my purpose for being that. That’s my why.

As reflected in the data collected during the interview process, the participants noted the benefits of the individualized, personalized nature of the coaching sessions. One participant summarized her perceptions of her coaching experience by stating the following:

The coaching part, I actually was excited about the coaching part. Because even when you are in here, you have a mentor inside of your building, but you want the perspective from outside your building; because if [the mentor] is very close to the situation sometimes you don’t get the clearest perspective because they’re here with you, and they’re in it. But, having the coach as an outside voice who could hear you, there’s no judgment. There’s just them listening to the facts, and they don’t have an attachment to it, so then the coaching piece can kind of help you along. It’s like that other voice you need that to just kind of help you lean on, and that voice can kind of help pick you up, and move you forward, because they might see things that you didn’t see in yourself. They can kinda help direct you and lead you because maybe you are in the dark hole (chuckles).
Sub-theme: Goal attainment.

The leaders also noted the importance of leadership coaching in attaining their personal or professional goals. Many participants noted the importance of goal-setting within the structured framework of the coaching sessions in helping them to understand, not only how to effectively plan and structure personal and professional goals, but also the importance of prioritizing action steps and creating a timeline for completion for the goal-setting. One leader noted:

Within the past few months, and after participating in the coaching sessions, I’ve been able to reach a place of comfort and more confidence at the job tasks that I perform, and the decisions I make, because of coaching opportunities.

Another leader echoed the value of coaching in promoting greater abilities in goal-setting, attainment, and job performance. The assistant principal described her thoughts as:

Having it [leadership coaching] for myself, it was eye opening. And, sometimes it’s better to have someone talk with you about ways to work through things. Because it’s amazing how someone who isn’t in the building can take the same picture you have in your mind and help you direct or redirect your thought process.

For another leader, the goal setting process involved in her leadership coaching sessions provided structure to her most important professional goal, improvement of special education services in her school. The leader noted how important the sessions were in planning, reflecting, and validating her work. The participant noted the following:

We started out with, “What’s your goal? What do you want to see?” And, my biggest goal was kind of turning around the special education department. Not that it’s broken, but I think there’s just things that can be improved. I want to have the model special
education department. That’s my ultimate goal. That’s where I want to work. That’s where I want my kids to go. That’s the department you should be looking at. Such and such high school, my school, what are they doing there? So, he [my coach] was like, “Well, how are you going to get there?” So, we started planning and decided to do a survey and basically find out what the teachers needed, and with each week we built off each step, so we started with a survey about what the teachers want and need. I found out they wanted more collaborative time, and they wanted more time together for fun things, celebrate birthdays, and whatnot. So, we made a plan for that. And, then it was they need more time, so we’re going to plan more time with peers and more continuity in who they co-teach with…so we are planning for that. So, we’ve worked on that. I knew what I wanted, but the coaching piece really pushed me and really helped to narrow it down for me to this is what I have to do next and to get that step. It’s been great.

**Sub-theme: Reflective practice.**

As researched by Bloom and his colleagues (2005) and validated by the participants of the study, the first-year assistant principals found “empathy, reassurance, and a mechanism for developing their own reflective practices” (p.11) through leadership coaching. As an emergent sub-theme, the notion that leadership coaching has promoted more reflective practices among the participants was common. As noted by one participant:

I love it [coaching]. I wish I had it earlier. My coach has done a tremendous job of making me think about stuff I already know and put it in a different context for me to speak to it. Where, before, I was just thinking, I struggled to find the words. He makes me more reflective. I think I’m a reflective person, but he really makes me think more deeply. And, he’s kind of connected some dots that I was kind of missing. And, kind of
given me some answers that I was stewing around in my brain, that he pointed out.

Here’s your answer: you just haven’t considered that to be the answer that you’ve been looking for. And, he’s a safe person. The fact that I can talk to him, confidentially, is nice. I don’t have to worry.

Another participant echoed the importance of leadership coaching in promoting professional growth through reflective practices. As noted by the participant:

You can’t grow without reflection. So, I think that every time that I met with my coach, I was able to sit back and think and then reflect. I would ask myself, “What did she say?” “What questions did she asks me?” “What were my responses?” And, to think about that for the next couple of days as things are going on and say, “Okay, well, how could I do that differently?” Or, maybe there’s something I do want to continue or maybe I should do that more. And, that’s what makes us better leaders…that reflection.

The impact of coaching sessions on reflective practice was noted by another participant with the following statement:

A lot of times, my coach would just ask a question, and I’d end up answering my own questions. I was kind of solving my own problems that…the day-to-day life is so busy to where sometimes you don’t take that for yourself to really kind of sort through it all. So, having someone to kind of ask those leading questions, “Well, tell me a little bit more about this,” or “You said that you didn’t like this, or talk to me about this.” Honestly, it made me really kind of very introspective and really look at myself in the mirror. I feel like it helped me solve my own problems, almost.

A fourth participant noted the importance of learning how to utilize reflective practices developed in her coaching sessions. The participant stated:
There is so much benefit to having someone talk to you about your job. Because when you’re in the moment, when you’re here at the school, you’re always focused on taking care of the other people. When you have that time set aside [in a coaching session], when you just sit down and reflect on your goals, your areas of strength, your areas you want to improve in…it just provides a nice, structured way to maintain that focus and that drive for self-improvement.

Finally, another participant described her perceptions of the benefits of leadership coaching on her reflective practices. She noted:

I enjoy reflecting on my own when I have my own time, but this year has gone by so fast that I’ve had to learn so much, that there hasn’t been a whole lot of time to reflect. And, when I did, it was here and there. So [in] meeting with the coach, and him asking me specific questions, and having me prioritize, and putting it all on me, by asking me specific questions, allowed me to take the time to think about it and to prioritize those things, and then really walk myself through things that I needed to reflect upon. Every session I walked away feeling lighter and thinking, “I have a plan”. He just had me walk through a plan, and there’s a timeline, and that was just really nice. I felt lighter, a little bit lifted.

In summary, for each of the study participants, leadership coaching provided some benefit to each member of the SLA II cohort. Most participants described the coaches’ experience as the most beneficial professional learning of the year, noting the value of the personalized focus of the sessions, the relationship developed between the coach and participant, the promotion of professional growth through the coaching sessions, and the development of each participants’ reflective practices.
Theme Five: Perceptions of Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1977) was the first to define the term *self-efficacy*. Bandura’s definition of self-efficacy refers to “an individual’s confidence about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a given context” (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998, p. 66) Since that time, researchers (McCollum & Kajs, 2007; Wood & Bandura, 1989) have further defined the importance of self-efficacy in leader development.

Participants in the study were asked to categorize their perceptions of their professional growth through the course of the year and to define their own self-efficacy as described by Bandura. Most of the participants expressed a great deal of satisfaction in their professional learning, their new position, and their own perceptions of self-efficacy. Common among the participants was an excitement for the future and a new sense of confidence that they did not have at the beginning of the school year.

When asked to describe their feelings of professional growth and their perceptions of self-efficacy, most noted the large amount of growth that had taken place over the course of the school year. One participant noted:

I am just, in general maybe, very hard on myself to where I maybe don’t feel like I’m doing things to my full potential or that maybe I’m not as confident as I should be in my ability, but I feel like I’ve come a long way. I would say this second semester, I feel like I’ve really blossomed. I feel like the growth at the beginning of the year was kind of steady, but I was still…not sure. Now, I feel a little more confident in, “Hey, I got this one.” I can do it. I don’t even need to ask. I’m just going to call this parent. I can handle this.
The sense of greater confidence and efficacy was echoed by several other participants in the study. Coinciding with the timing of the start of the leadership coaching sessions at the beginning of the second semester, many of the leaders noted a sense of greater self-efficacy at about that time. The second participant noted:

I really felt like, just recently, in January or February, I’ve really felt like I am in the position for the right reasons. I’ve had a great support system, and I think that’s what helped me grow because people count of me. Now, I feel more comfortable. Now I can give that advice. I can say, “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Yet another assistant principal noted her feelings of growth by stating:

I think I’ve grown; with every day it’s just you learn something new. I didn’t know that yesterday, but I do today. Now, it’s in the memory bank, and I put it in my little file folder of what I need to do, so I think that awareness, I think it grows every day and I don’t think it’s something that will ever stop with every new challenge comes, “Oh, we have to do this in this situation”. So, it’s really every day is learning, and I think the awareness that you don’t know everything and that you have to continue to seek out those resources.

A third participant voiced her perceptions as follows:

Yes, I feel like my self-efficacy has grown, and I feel that has grown because I am no longer…I don’t lack the confidence anymore to approach someone else and give them the ability to go do what needs to be done. Not that I have to do it all myself, but I can inspire my departments that I’m over, or my lunch duty team, or speaking to a parent. So, yes…I feel like my self-efficacy has grown for sure. Through all of it, through SLA II and the coaching sessions, and through all of it…I feel valuable at the end.
For many of the participants, their journey of professional growth and advanced self-efficacy still comes with a strong awareness that while they have come far in their journey, they believe there is still a long way to go in order to become the fully actualized leader they envision. One participant noted:

So, I feel like I’ve grown a lot in my maturity as a leader, that I’ve kind of let go of some of the things that I valued, but in this as a teacher, that I thought would roll into my leadership, some of that I’ve had to let go, and I’m okay with that, surprisingly so. Like, I have embraced my role this year. So, I hope to continue that. I have completely grown. And, the factors for that have been experience. I mean, simply experience will help you grow if you reflect on it. So, the experience and then the reflection of it. And then, the coaching.

Another participant noted:

I still don’t feel like I’m anywhere close to where I want to be eventually, but yeah. I feel much more confident in my role now, for sure. I feel like I know what I’m supposed to be doing and how I can help people. I just want to take what I’ve learned now and use it more effectively, continue to use it more effectively.

A final participant summed up the sense of expectation and further work noted by many of the assistant principals. She summarized:

I think that’s a natural part of it [having more expectations]. You always want to leave things better than they were when you got there. I have learned, I have grown, and I have confidence in my abilities, but now I really want to learn to lead others.
Summary

Through the course of this research study, data collection of interviews, observations, field notes, and a review of a pre-learning survey, five distinct themes, with several sub-themes, emerged to comprehensively describe the lived experiences of the first-year assistant principals. By examining the participants’ perceptions on their roles and responsibilities, their preparation for the position, their professional learning, the impact of professional leadership coaching, and their beliefs of self-efficacy, a thick description of the case study formed. For the first-year assistant principals who participated in the study, a sense of relief and accomplishment is noted in the final interviews as the school year ended. Most acknowledged through their perceptions that their new position brought learning, successes, and challenges. In terms of their own understanding of their professional growth and feelings of self-efficacy, many described their developed confidences, plans for future goals, and their own reflections for their future learning.
Table 5
Emergent Themes of the Study

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Historically, researchers and educational leaders have paid little substantial interest in the training, selection, job satisfaction, and motivations associated with assistant principalship. Further, few studies have focused on the changing and challenging role of the assistant principalship in terms of professional learning, capacity building, and self-efficacy (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). This phenomenological case study was designed to provide a voice to the perceptions, insights, and reflections of a group of new assistant principals who faced a challenging, complex, and enlightening first year in the position. By examining the lived experiences of these first-year assistant principals, a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities, professional learning, and reflections on self-efficacy emerged.

This phenomenological case study sought to provide previously neglected insight to the lived experiences of the assistant principalship from participants who were located in a suburban school district and have shared professional learning experiences. This study was designed to focus on the assistant principals’ voices in terms of their perceptions of their professional learning cohort, experiences in promoting a positive school culture, understanding of their job roles, management of their responsibilities, celebration of their successes, and meeting the demands of the many challenges associated with the position. In addition, the study sought to explore the assistant principals’ perceptions of their professional growth and feelings of self-efficacy.

This phenomenological case study addressed one research questions related to the overall goals of the study:
1. What are the experiences of first-year assistant principals participating in a professional development leadership academy?

Two additional questions provided further information necessary to the phenomenological aspects and framed the case study:

a. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

b. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

The adult learning theory or andragogy served as the basis for the conceptual framework of the study. An understanding of the characteristics and guiding principles of adult learners was vital to the overall understanding of the experiences of the assistant principals. The adult learning theory proposed by Malcolm Knowles in 1968 focused on the learning styles of adults. Knowles noted the characteristics of adult learners include the desire to direct one’s learning through an independent self-awareness. Further, Knowles noted adult learners should serve as a resource for future learning based on a “reservoir” of previous life experiences and a need for learning goals to be directly related to the development of social roles. Adult learners have a desire for their learning experiences to be problem-centered and for there to be an immediate return on the learning investment. Finally, adult learners are also encouraged by internal factors such as intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1990; Merriam, 2001).

Knowles suggested four guiding principles apply to the learning needs of adults, including the need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of the instruction; the need for experiences, including mistakes, that serve as the basis for all learning; the need for problem-centered activities that drive the professional learning; and the need for all learning and activities
to have immediate relevance and real-life application (Knowles, 1984). Knowles’ theory of adult learning was an essential element in understanding the professional learning aspect of the bound case study of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy.

Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (1977) served as a guide for the theoretical framework. A theoretical framework is defined as “a structure that guides research by relying on formal theory and constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships” (Eisenhart, 1991, p. 205). Further, Mertens (2015) noted that the theoretical framework “has implications for every decision made in the research process” (p. 3). This study sought to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of new assistant principals who participated in a professional learning academy with secondary questions focused on the professional growth and self-efficacy of the participants. Contemporary researchers including Anderson et al. (2008) and Paglis (2010) have linked self-efficacy principles and beliefs to leadership capacity defining the term, Leader Self-Efficacy (LSE). Utilizing the Self-Efficacy theory in the research defined the importance of the experiences of the participants in growing their professional capacity and Leader Self-Efficacy (LSE).

The comprehensive literature review emphasized the lack of historical research focused on assistant principals and their professional learning. As noted widely by researchers (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Matthew, 2003; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Petrides et al., 2004), a wealth of research exists on the importance of professional learning for principals and superintendents, but little of that research is dedicated to the role of the assistant principal. The comprehensive literature review also included an examination of leadership coaching, professional learning for leaders, and leadership self-efficacy. Historically, researchers have noted the assistant principal position had no formal, defined roles and responsibilities and was often subject to the discretion
of the building-level leader. The lack of systemic, job-embedded professional learning has left many assistant principals feeling frustrated and ill-prepared for the demands of their position. The importance and success of assistant principals should not be undervalued as the position most often begins the career pathway for all senior-level educational leadership positions, including principals and superintendents. The importance of professional learning and leadership coaching on the professional growth and self-efficacy of new assistant principals were also discussed in the literature review.

**Context of Findings**

This study provided a voice to the lived experiences of new assistant principals who participated in their school district’s professional learning leadership academy. The first-year experiences of the assistant principals, as told through their interviews, provided an intriguing depiction of the participants’ roles and responsibilities, struggles, challenges, and successes. Further, the assistant principals were able to vocalize their perceptions of their professional learning, including the importance of their participation in the district’s Superintendent’s Leadership Academy on their professional growth and feelings of self-efficacy. The findings of the study were divided into five distinct themes that emerged during the interview process, through observation, and from the analysis of the District’s pre-learning survey. Further, sub-themes emerged during the analysis and review of the collected data.

**Theme One: Preparation for the Role**

Throughout the history of the assistant principalship, researchers have noted a lack of a systemic and concrete definition of the assistant principalship. Further, research has described the reform efforts of contemporary educators and researchers to redefine the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals to include the facilitation of instructional leadership
(Celikten, 2001; Greenfield, 1985; Gurley et al., 2013; Panyako & Rorie, 1987). Researchers have stressed the importance of strong building-level leadership in influencing student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996); however, the assistant principal position has been a historically underutilized resource in terms of instructional leadership (Gurley et al., 2013; Hartzell, 1993).

The roles and responsibilities for assistant principals vary widely and are often at the direction of the building-level principal (Barnett et al., 2012; Kwan, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Petrides et al., 2014). The historic responsibilities of assistant principals have primarily consisted of supervisory type responsibilities, including supervising students and teachers, relieving the principal of duties, providing administrative support to teachers, and managing a variety of other tasks (Koru, 1993).

During the interview process, the participants of the study noted that prior to assuming the assistant principal role, they felt that they had a good understanding of the requirements of the position and the demands of the job. However, many participants acknowledged their pre-existing thoughts and beliefs of the job did not mirror the complexity, demands, and requirements of the position. One participant noted, “The totality of the job was very different than my previous assumptions.”

Several of the participants noted feeling “shock,” “sadness,” and “surprise” when faced with the unexpected realization of the day-to-day reality of the position. Many of the assistant principals were dismayed to find that the majority of their day would not be spent in classrooms supporting the needs of teachers and students. One leader even acknowledged that he had misjudged other assistant principals’ methods of managing their workloads noting, “I thought
that they did not know how to manage all of those responsibilities efficiently. Now, I realize those many roles manage me to some degree.”

Many of the leaders had previous leadership opportunities afforded to them by past supervisors. While the participants felt a sense of appreciation and confidence in having these past leadership experiences, including grade level leader, department chair, and site-level supervision, many noted they lacked a full appreciation for the complexity and totality of the role. Many participants noted the only way to have a clear understanding of the challenges of the position was to actually work in the role, thereby gaining a deeper understanding through experience. This idea of gaining a deeper understanding of the position through experience was described by some as “Baptism by fire” or “trial by fire” and was a common theme among the participants. The idea of “living the experience” as one of the best methods in understanding the position was widely shared by the participants.

While the actual assistant principalship was very different from preconceived notions, many of the new leaders credited the structured opportunities of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy and the supportive collegiality of the college cohort in creating a productive experience. The assistant principals acknowledged the steep learning curve associated with assuming their new position but felt supported by the planned design of the leadership academy, the individualized nature of the professional coaching sessions, and the opportunities created in the work experiences. Further, the collegiality of the SLA II and college cohort served as an emotional support for the leaders as they worked and learned their way through the first year.

**Theme Two: Roles and Responsibilities**

Researchers (Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006) have noted the potential of developmental stagnancy of assistant principals if not properly developed with systemic, planned
professional learning experiences focused on instructional leadership. Traditionally, the assistant principalship has been associated with rote, menial tasks and responsibilities. Glanz (1994) noted the position was “linked to practices and taken-for-granted notions of the past” (p. 286).

The roles and responsibilities assigned to assistant principals have traditionally been based on the discretion of supervisors, mostly in the form of the building principal, due to the lack of a systemic job description (Barnette et al., 2012; Kwan, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Petrides et al., 2014).

The study participants noted the rote, managerial, and supervisory type duties that are commonly described in research literature. Many of the assistant principals found their job responsibilities overwhelmingly complex at times and often contradictory to the role they had hoped to assume as an instructional leader. As one participant noted, “It’s really been hard for me. One, to stay in my lane, and two, to figure out where my lane is.” This difficulty of staying “in the lane” was a common sentiment shared by many of the participants who had expected more time for an instructional leadership focus to support the needs of students and teachers.

While the participants noted the importance performing their assigned roles and responsibilities, the district’s focus on the importance of instructional leadership resonated throughout the interview process. As noted by researchers including Greenfield (1985), Harvey (1994), Marshall & Greenfield (1987), and Miskel and Cosgrove (1985), school districts and educational leaders must demand a re-evaluation of the assistant principalship from a focus on rote, menial type task to more impactful role of instructional leader. As echoed throughout the participant interviews, the most important duty for the new assistant principals was their responsibility to students and teachers in the classroom as an instructional leader.
Through the interview process, the participants noted their biggest challenges came from a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the changing and demanding position of assistant principal. This lack of job awareness created feelings of being overwhelmed by the totality of the many changing responsibilities. Additionally, many participants noted their difficulties in shifting their instructional focus from pedagogy to andragogy in order to build capacity and motivation in others.

Three common successes emerged among the participants during the interview process. First, the assistant principals noted their growing confidence and efficacy in their professional practice by understanding and validating their professional growth and learning. Second, the assistant principals described the ability to build and sustain influential relationships with students, teachers, parents, and the larger school community as a success. Finally, the participants noted their growing understanding of the leadership process allowed them to have a deeper, richer understanding of the “big picture” of their position and their role as part of a school district.

The study participants also reflected on the importance of their relationship with the building-level principal. The importance of this relationship has been noted by educational researchers (Austin & Brown, 1970; Gorton, 1987; Hartzell et al., 1995; Kaplan & Owings, 1999). While most of the assistant principals had a healthy and thriving connection with their supervising principal, three participants noted the hardship and disappointment of a strained relationship. For the participants in healthy and productive professional relationships with their building principals, an inherited a sense of confidence and efficacy developed. Many of the assistant principals described these productive relationships as “trusted,” “important,” “respected,” and “appreciated.” While most of the participants were in healthy and professional
relationships with their building level leaders, three assistant principals described the relationships with their supervisor as unhealthy. For these leaders, the lack of a healthy, respected relationship stymied their professional growth, leadership capacity, and feelings of self-efficacy.

**Theme Three: Professional Learning**

As noted in the research literature and evident through the interview process, schools and school districts have continued to evolve into diverse, challenging, and accountability-driven entities where school communities demand high expectations and continued school improvement. Oliver (2005) noted that educational leaders, school districts, and colleges and universities must prepare new assistant principals to understand and to deal with “the milieu confronting them as their job responsibilities and tasks continue to change” (p. 90). The professional learning offered by the school district was an important theme for the participants of the study. Study participants echoed the findings of contemporary research literature, describing their lack of preparation by traditional pre-service leadership programs (Brown-Ferrigno, 2003; Levine, 2005; Read, 2012).

The work of the school district in supporting the professional learning, growth, and efficacy of the participants was well documented throughout the study. In order to document the professional learning perceptions and expectations of the participants, the district administered a pre-learning survey to all SLA II members. Many participants noted the diverse needs of their schools and the challenging and changing dynamic of their professional roles as concerns in the survey. Study participants wanted professional learning that was job-embedded and relevant for their current positions. As such, most of the participants noted the need for scenario-based, relevant learning experiences that offered the opportunity to collaborate with their professional
colleagues. The participants noted that effective professional learning was hands-on, practical, experiential, applicable, and relevant.

All participants of this study were past members of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy I as high capacity teacher-leaders, participated in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II for first-year assistant principals, and were part of a piloted college certification program cohort. As such, participants had two years of continuous professional learning and collaborative experiences designed by the district. Through the structured supports and planned activities of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy and the pilot university certification program, participants remained grouped in a collaborative cohort or network of peers.

The participants reflected on the learning opportunities afforded to them during the course of their first-year in the assistant principalship. Many of the study participants noted the “hands-on practice” opportunities offered by the SLA were important as part of their relevant learning cycle. As described by the participants, these relevant learning opportunities included activities, scenarios, and experiences that prompted professional dialogue and promoted professional growth, confidence, and efficacy.

Some of the participants noted a sense of disappointment in the instructional activities planned by the university program. One participant noted, “Some of those university people don’t have a clue to how busy we are. Or, maybe they do and just don’t care.” However, for most of the participants, the most pronounced benefit of the college cohort was in the continued ability to sustain their peer network or cohort that originally developed in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy I. Many other participants noted the importance of the cohort experience in developing a type of collegial social network that was supportive and nonjudgmental. The forming of this social network emerged as an important theme as participants felt comfortable
and supported as part of a district “team” or “family.” The participants noted feelings of confidence in having a network of colleagues that would continue to evolve, grow, and learn together.

**Theme Four: Leadership Coaching**

Leadership coaching, as a professional growth activity for educational leaders, developed in the early 2000s as a result of the more rigorous and demanding expectations for school improvement and student achievement outlined in the *No Child Left Behind* Legislation (2001). Researchers including Chandler and her colleagues (2011) noted that professional learning activities that promote goal setting and reflective practice, as defined in leadership coaching, can assist educational leaders in creating a positive school-wide climate, promoting a sense of greater self-awareness and understanding, and improving reflective practices and leadership skills.

As part of the activities designed specifically for the members of Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II cohort, the school district paired all new participating assistant principals with a professionally trained leadership coach. The district’s goal for the leadership coaching sessions included a plan for each coaching session to be authentic, individualized, and personalized to the learning needs of the participants. Coaching sessions began in January during the second semester of the school year, and each participant received at least six coaching sessions based on the individualize needs of each participant.

The most promising study findings came from the participants’ reflections on the importance of the leadership coaching sessions. While the participants had a mixed degree of knowledge and understanding about leadership coaching prior to beginning the sessions, all were open to the potential value of the process. During the interview process, it was clear that the leadership coaching component of the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II experience was
the most influential factor in the increased professional growth, the developed leadership
capacity, and the gained self-efficacy experienced by the participants. A common perspective of
the participants was the individualized and personalized nature of coaching as a professional
learning activity. As noted by one participant, the leadership coaching sessions were “all about
me,” and as such, the growth in professional practice and confidence was focused and deliberate.

Participants also described increased ability to solve problems, strategically plan, and set
goals as a result of the leadership coaching sessions. Additionally, participants noted increases
in their reflective practices as a result of leadership coaching. The study participants recounted
their gained confidences and abilities as a direct result of the leadership coaching sessions.
Bloom and his colleagues (2005) noted that leadership coaching can generate “empathy,
reassurance, and a mechanism for developing reflective practices” (p.11). The participants of the
study validated Bloom’s position by noting throughout the interview process the influence of
leadership coaching on their reflective practices. As noted by one participant, “You can’t grow
without reflection. So, I think that every time I met with my coach, I was able to sit back and
think and reflect.” This type of inherent reflectivity allowed the leaders to become more
proactive and productive leaders.

**Theme Five: Leader Self-Efficacy**

Albert Bandura (1977) was the first to describe the constructs of self-efficacy. Bandura’s
definition of self-efficacy describes an individual’s “confidence about his or her abilities to
mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to successfully
execute a specific task within a given context (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998, p. 66). Further study
describes the influence of efficacy beliefs on leaders as Leadership Self-Efficacy (LSE).
Researchers define Leadership Self-Efficacy as “the leader’s awareness of, and confidence in,
their abilities to mobilize the motivation, the cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to master the tasks involved in their leader role successfully” (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014, p. 635). Further, researchers have noted strong correlations between leaders with high levels of leadership self-efficacy and high performance ratings.

Participants of the study were asked to define and describe their feelings of their own professional growth and self-efficacy. Most of the participants noted a great sense of pride in their professional learning and a sense of growing confidence in their professional capacity and self-efficacy. Many of the participants had substantial shifts in understanding, competencies, and confidences around the semester break point, coinciding with the start of the educational leadership coaching sessions.

Common to all of the participants was a sense of pride and expectation about the upcoming school year. While most described a great sense of accomplishment in their professional learning for their first year in the assistant principalship, there was also a continued expectation of future learning among the participants. As noted profoundly by one participant, “I spent this year learning for me, but I am looking forward to turning that learning into something for teachers.”

**Limitations of Findings**

The limitations of this researched focused primarily on the lack of diversity among the study participants. For this phenomenological case study, I selected participants from a local suburban school district. Due to several factors, including increases to the budget and a number of retirements and promotions within the district, a large number of assistant principals were hired for the school year in this district. Even with the large number of new assistant principal hires, many of the participants were female, and most were Caucasian. The participants, while
selected from one school district, did have a varying array of educational experiences at multiple school levels and in schools with vastly different socio-economic structures. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding across participants, a more gender and ethnically diverse participant population could be studied.

Another potential limitation of the study was my advanced knowledge of the context of the district and the participants in the study. As a staff member in the selected district, I did have a strong knowledge of the selection process for assistant principals in the district, an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals from having served as one in the district, a familiarity with the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy, and experience as a professionally trained leadership coach. Consequently, participants of the study were familiar with me and my position. However, the familiarity seemed to facilitate a trusting researcher-researched relationship as I worked to promote a trustworthy and transparent framework for the study of new assistant principals.

Important to the research process is demonstrating clearly the integrity of the participants’ voices. As someone who is familiar with the participants, a trusting relationship valuable to all researchers and participants formed almost immediately. As clearly demonstrated through the interview process, the participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and perceptions, even about the most difficult of topic or theme because of the rapport and previously established a trusting relationship.

**Implications of Findings**

In order to gain a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the assistant principalship, this phenomenological case study addressed one primary research question:
1. What are the experiences of first-year assistant principals participating in a professional development leadership academy?

The findings show that the assistant principalship is a dynamic, challenging, and ever-evolving position in the career-path of educational leaders. Though the participants noted an array of varying roles and responsibilities, each had a clear understanding that they were selected as a leader based on a deeper expectation of their abilities to build and sustain important relationships with school stakeholders; their understanding of the importance of instructional leadership; and their promise of quickly contributing to a positive school culture, increased student achievement, and systemic school improvement.

Participants’ voices were clear in their voicing their experiences as each leader was able to reflect on the year in the position. Each leader described initial feelings of frustration, shock, or surprise in assuming a position in which they lacked preparation. The structured supports provided by the leadership academy including the cohort of collaborative peers, professional learning sessions, and the leadership coaching provided much needed guidance and professional learning during this time. Additionally, the participants acknowledged their principals were a strong and important influence in their learning evolution. However, the participants also acknowledged the importance of living the experience as the means to better understanding.

Two additional research questions related to the principle goals of the research included:

a. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

b. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?
Through the process of examining all of the data sources, including the interviews, observation notes, and the pre-learning survey, it is clear that self-efficacy and professional growth capacity have developed in the new leaders. As noted in the interviews, the participants had a sense of pride, excitement, and anticipation for their futures, including continued professional learning, goal setting, and leadership capacity. According to the participants, while “living the experience” was the only way to gain the necessary skills, understanding, and experiences, the structured supports of the leadership academy promoted their understanding, professional growth, and feelings of confidence and self-efficacy.

Through the study, we are better able to understand the lived experiences of new assistant principals regarding their perceptions, feelings, and beliefs. The participants’ perspectives echoed contemporary research as to the nature of the assistant principalship as being hectic, challenging, undefined, and ever-changing. A critical factor in the perceived success of these new leaders was the support received from the professional development leadership academy, the direction and guidance from a strong and supportive principal, the social networking collaborative developed by an established peer cohort, and the professional learning and confidences gained from professional leadership coaching.

Several key components of professional learning and practice factored into the successes experienced by the participants. These factors shaped the learning process for the new assistant principals while guiding their professional practice. First, the new assistant principals were provided membership in a peer cohort that allowed the promotion of a supportive, family-type collegiality among the participants. The participants noted this “family” experience provided them with a sense of belonging that garnered them much needed support and confidences during the first-year of their assistant principalship. Second, the school district paid particular interest to
the young leaders early in their careers and invested in structured professional development (SLA I) while the leaders were serving as high capacity teacher-leaders. The SLA I cohort was designed to provide the members with a broader view of leadership experiences and served as an entry-level learning opportunity to the district’s structured, tiered professional development program. Next, the school district continued to invest in supporting the new leaders by reemerging them in the supportive, structured Superintendent’s Leadership Academy II designed for first year assistant principals. The district’s interest in supporting their young leaders was facilitated by a pre-learning survey to discern best learning practices from the participants. Finally, the school district created a plan for providing professional leadership coaching for all interested members of the SLA II. As a result of the many structured supports provided by the school district, participants reported enhanced professional learning, the ability to plan and achieve professional goals, and a heightened ability to understand and reflect upon their own practices.

For the participants of the study, the first year of the assistant principalship was a year of learning, and members were grateful that they were allowed to “own” their experiences. The leaders were quick to acknowledge the support and guidance of the district, their principals, their leadership coaches, and their peers as supports in the learning and growing process. Additionally, the assistant principals reflected positively upon their increased professional growth and self-efficacy as they prepared to take on year two in the position. As demonstrated through the voices of the participant first-year assistant principals, the first year of leadership was just the beginning of their learning and leading.

The implications of this research have far reaching implications to schools and school districts throughout the state and nation. Educational research notes that the average tenure of a
district superintendent in Georgia is only 3.2 years. Further, 22% of districts in Georgia have a change in superintendent each year. Additionally, the average turnover rate of principals in Georgia is 19% and 23% in high poverty schools (Dolinger, 2017). The need for highly trained and competent leadership continues to be a priority across all educational settings. As such, the practice of preparing our new leaders is vitally important.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of first-year assistant principals participating in a district’s professional learning leadership academy. The goals of the study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the roles and responsibilities, professional learning, and preparation of the participants in order to gain a more comprehensive awareness of the position and the factors that influence these leaders’ professional growth and self-efficacy.

Historically, research on the assistant principalship has been lacking in describing the importance of the role, including possible implications to systemic school improvement, positive school culture, and student achievement. As such, the continued research of the assistant principalship, including the recruitment, training, professional learning, and capacity building for these leaders, is important. The findings of this study describe the importance systemic, sustained professional learning for new leaders.

The most exciting revelation from the study focused on the impact of leadership coaching on the participants. Many of the participants called their experiences with leadership coaching the most influential professional learning of the year, and some quantified it as the most beneficial professional learning of their career. A study designed to focus on the impact of professional leadership coaching on improving school culture, promoting school reform, or
facilitating increased student achievement would greatly enhance existing literature associated with the assistant principalship and educational leaders.

Another recommendation for future research includes a study focused on how leadership coaching could impact gender-related issues for educational leaders including assistant principals. As noted in the emergent themes of this study, three of the female participants noted difficulties in building relationships with their principals and noted their belief that gender bias was an issue. Further study of impact of gender in the assistant principalship could prove important to educational research.

Finally, further research on the influence of gender and ethnicity on the assistant principalship would be valuable. Participants of this study were mostly Caucasian so to broaden the scope of the work, a more diverse participant pool for a study involving the influence of leadership coaching on the assistant principalship would be an important addition to the existing educational research.

**Conclusion**

As an educational leader, I am very interested in the planning, development, implementation, and collaborative processes that guide professional learning for educators and educational leaders. As noted widely in research literature, study on the assistant principalship has been widely ignored by educational researchers. The assistant principalship serves as the entry-level position in the pathway for most educational leaders, including principals and superintendents; as such, the need for comprehensive research into their experiences and professional learning is a necessary requirement for continued growth and development.

The participants of this study have contributed to the greater understanding of the assistant principalship, and they have also contributed to my professional growth as well. The
stories of these assistant principals symbolized the work of many other first-year assistant principals across the nation. While experiencing the difficulties and challenges of the first year in the role, the participants valued their struggles, successes, and professional learning as part of the continuum of self-improvement.

The need for reform of the assistant principalship is evident, even in districts that work diligently to support the needs of their young leaders. Marshall and Hooley (2006) noted, “As state policymakers, professional associations, and university professors ponder and debate the formal training and experience required for administrative positions” (p. 13), the need for these leaders continue. As the assistant principalship is the first entry-level position to the educational leadership career ladder, those entities that support the professional learning for educational leaders should plan specific learning experiences that provide interested teacher-leaders with beneficial professional learning.

Schools and school districts will continue to need enthusiastic, innovative, and creative leaders to meet the challenges of diverse and changing schools while preparing students and staffs for the demands of continued school improvement and reform. The challenges facing educational leaders continue including a changing and diverse communities, declining financial resources, state and federal accountability measures, and public perceptions regarding public education. As such, this research has implications for school districts, colleges and universities, and certification agencies who all work to support the needs of educational leaders.

A portrait of the assistant principalship developed through the participants of the study. A deeper understanding of the roles, responsibilities, challenges, successes, and professional learning needs for assistant principals emerged. The participants of this study told the stories of their roles and responsibilities, their challenges and success, their professional learning and
leadership coaching. Additionally, these leaders described how they developed a greater sense of professional growth and self-efficacy through their many experiences of the year. I hope this study inspires other researchers to take the next step in studying the assistant principalship. More importantly, I hope this study encourages school districts to continue to invest energy, resources, professional learning, and leadership coaching in their young leaders.
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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER FROM KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY
2/16/2018

Debra Murdock

Re: Your follow-up submission of 2/6/2018, Study #18-395: Promoting Growth and Self-Efficacy in Assistant Principals

Dear Ms. Murdock,

Your application has been reviewed by IRB members. Your study is eligible for expedited review under the FDA and DHHS (OHRP) designation of category 7 - Individual or group characteristics or behavior.

This is to confirm that your application has been approved. The protocol approved is Taped interviews and observations and pre-learning survey responses to examine the lived experiences of new assistant principals who are participating in a professional learning leadership academy. The consent procedure described is in effect.

NOTE: All surveys, recruitment flyers/emails, and consent forms must include the IRB study number noted above, prominently displayed on the first page of all materials.

You are granted permission to conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The IRB calls your attention to the following obligations as Principal Investigator of this study.

1. The study is subject to continuing review on or before 2/16/2019. At least two weeks prior to that time, go to http://research.kennesaw.edu/irb/progress-report-form.php to submit a progress report. Progress reports not received in a timely manner will result in expiration and closure of the study.

2. Any proposed changes to the approved study must be reported and approved prior to implementation. This is accomplished through submission of a progress report along with revised consent forms and survey instruments.

3. All records relating to conducted research, including signed consent documents, must be retained for at least three years following completion of the research. You are responsible for ensuring that all records are accessible for inspection by authorized representatives as needed. Should you leave or end your professional relationship with KSU for any reason, you are responsible for providing the IRB with information regarding the housing of research records and who will maintain control over the records during this period.
4. Unanticipated problems or adverse events relating to the research must be reported promptly to the IRB. See http://research.kennesaw.edu/irb/reporting-unanticipated-problems.php for definitions and reporting guidance.

5. A final progress report should be provided to the IRB at the closure of the study.

Contact the IRB at irb@kennesaw.edu or at (470) 578-2268 if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Christine Ziegler, Ph.D.
KSU Institutional Review Board Director and Chair

cc: ajohn560@kennesaw.edu
APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE SCHOOL DISTRICT
REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Name: Debra Cowart Murdock

CCSD Employee: Yes  No  If NO, list employer:

College/University Supervising Activities: Kennesaw State University  
Degree in Progress (Level/Area): Ed.D. Educational Leadership  
Locations for Data Collection: School-based location  

Date of Request: 2/8/2018  Requested Date(s) for Data Collection: 2/28/2018-4/01/2018  
Professor’s Name: Dr. Arvin Johnson  Phone #: Email: ajohn560@kennesaw.edu

Include with this request:

- A letter from your supervising professor on college or university letterhead indicating support for your research and his/her confirmation of data collection validity.
- A brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct. (Page 2 of this form).
- Method of data collection assessment (Page 2 of this form); Number of respondents, etc.
- Copy of interview questions, surveys, etc. that will be used. If student data/videos are used, a notarized “Release of Educational Records for Research Purposes Confidentiality Statement” and a copy of a letter requesting parent permission to use the data will be required.

Debra Cowart Murdock do hereby submit to not hold the Cherokee County School System liable for any findings, or commentary involved in this research. I understand that without the express written permission of the Cherokee County Board of Education, I am not authorized to conduct any data collection involving system employees or students and/or any other information that is protected by Federal or State Law. Furthermore, a copy of all findings and data collection instruments will be made available to the Cherokee County Board of Education. All research is to be sent to the Office of Assessment upon completion of the project.

Signature: Debra Murdock  
Digitally signed by Debra Murdock  
Date: 2/08/2018

Signature of Principal (if applicable): Debra Murdock  
Date: 2/14/18

Send completed form to: Dr. Jennifer Scrivner, Director, Office of Assessment, ESA, Building G

Staff Use Only

Permission given  
Permission denied

Denied due to:

Revised 01/2012
Please write a brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived, shared experiences of new assistant principals who participated in a district’s leadership professional learning academy. This phenomenological research was designed within the case study of a district’s leadership academy to explore the assistant principals’ experiences, their beliefs on how participating in the leadership academy promoted their leadership capacity, and their feelings of self-efficacy throughout the process. In the limited research available on assistant principals, most researchers describe the limited responsibilities given to the position. Additionally, research on assistant principals notes the feelings of frustration experienced by those in the position stemming from the lack of position, power, and control much of which is delineated by the building-level principal (Black, 2002; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2005). By focusing on the lived experiences of the new assistant principals, this study sought to understand the job roles, cultures, responsibilities, policies and daily challenges faced by the participants. Additionally, the study sought to gain understanding of the assistant principals’ feelings regarding self-efficacy and leadership capacity as participants of the leadership academy.

This research has implications for school district administrators, colleges and universities, state educational agencies, and for those others who provide professional learning for new assistant principals.

Indicate your method of data collection assessment (surveys, interviews, and/or test data)
The method of data collection will be structured interviews.

Check the appropriate box(es) which indicate respondents:
- Administrators
- Teachers/Certified Personnel
- Classified Personnel
- Students

Note the number of data collection instruments being used (i.e., number of expected respondents)
The study will include 12 participants with at least one structured interview; semi-structured follow-up interviews may be needed.

Revised 01/2012
Release of “Educational Records” for Research Purposes
Confidentiality Statement

I, [Signature], being a Certified Educator within the employee of the Cherokee County School District having applied for and received permission to review student educational records in connection with a research project for a degree program in which I am currently enrolled understand and agree as follows:

1) The information I will receive is an “Educational Record” as defined by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA") 20 U.S.C. 1232g

2) I will maintain the information in a confidential manner and will not release any student identifiable information to any person or persons.

3) I will return all student identifiable information I received at the conclusion of my project.

4) I will not release or publish any student identifiable information within my project, to my professor(s), my peers or any other persons.

5) I will maintain the “Educational Records” in a secure location and take reasonable steps to assure that same is not released inadvertently while in my possession.

6) I understand that if I violate any provision hereof, even inadvertently, I will subject myself to discipline which could include the termination of my employment.

[Signature]

Notary Public
My commission Expires: [June 8, 2018]
APPENDIX C

EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS
Esteemed Leaders:

As discussed during our Superintendent’s Leadership Academy, I am conducting a research project (dissertation) on the perceptions of new assistant principals regarding their role, expectations, and professional learning in order to support professional growth and self-efficacy during the first year of the assistant principalship.

The research study entitled, Promoting the Professional Growth and Self-Efficacy of New Assistant Principals, uses the following definition for leadership self-efficacy: the leader’s awareness of, and confidence in, his/her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to master the tasks involved in the leadership role successfully.

I would like to invite you to be an important voice in my study. Participants’ identity will be kept confidential and accordingly, responses will be coded in the research study. In order to support the research with your valuable insights, I will need to conduct one interview (semi-structured, approximately 45 minutes in length), ask that you complete a demographic survey (attached for your information), and sign an informed consent agreement (attached for your review). Additionally, I would like to request the opportunity to audiotape our interview, if permissible by you, for documentation of the study. All audio tapes will be kept secured on a locked device until transcription is complete and then destroyed per research protocols.

I am happy to set up a meeting time with you, at your convenience, if you are willing to assist me with this valuable study. Please let me know if you are willing to participate and if so, please send some possible times for our meeting. I will work on your schedule!

Thank you, again, for your consideration! I look forward to learning more from you!

Debra Murdock
APPENDIX D

DISTRICT’S PRE-LEARNING SURVEY
School District Open-Ended Questions for SLA II (New Assistant Principals)

Assistant Principals: Please provide your thoughts to the following questions in order to better prepare for our meetings.

Describe your characteristics that you consider strengths in your new administrative position. *
Your answer

Reflect on and describe your perceptions of the assistant principal position prior to assuming the job. How has your understanding of the role of the assistant principal changed? *
Your answer

After two-months in the new position, what has surprised you about your assistant principal responsibilities? *
Your answer

What skills do you want to further develop or refine to benefit your leadership? *
Your answer
How would you describe effective professional learning for leaders? *

Your answer

Describe your knowledge of leadership coaching. *

Your answer

What are your expectations in terms of professional growth from the leadership coaching? *

Your answer

What professional goal(s) do you have for your first year of the assistant principalship? *

Your answer
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Research Interview Protocol Form

Research Project: Promoting the Professional Growth and Self-Efficacy of New Assistant Principals

Date: __________________________
Time: __________________________ AM/PM
Location: __________________________

Interviewer: __________________________
Interviewee: __________________________

Notes/Reminders for the Researcher:
- Consent form signed:__________
- Demographic Survey Completed:__________

Acknowledgments to the Interviewee:
- Thank you for your participation and insight. Your input will be valuable to the research and the work of school districts and educational agencies.
- Our conversation and all work together is confidential. Your participation is Appreciated.
**Research Questions:**

In order to examine the lived experiences of new assistant principals participating in a professional learning academy, this phenomenological case study will seek to respond to one primary research question:

1. What is the experience of first-year assistant principals participating in a professional development leadership academy?

Two additional questions will provide additional information to the phenomenological aspect and to frame the case study include:

   a. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of self-efficacy having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?
   
   b. What are the new assistant principals’ perceptions of professional growth having participated in the professional learning leadership academy?

**Methods of Disseminating Results:**

Interview responses will be transcribed, coded and added to the collection of data (responses) gathered from all participants. Themes will be identified, and conclusions will be made to determine the overall findings of the study.

**Interview Questions:**

- “Describe your perceptions of your first year as an assistant principal?”
- “Describe your job responsibilities as a new assistant principal. Were you prepared for those responsibilities prior to beginning the new position?”
• “Describe your feelings relative to your new position as an Assistant Principal. What are your successes during this first year? What would you wish you would have known so that you could have had a better experience?”

• “Describe your perceptions of your leadership coaching sessions.”

• “What are your perceptions of the professional learning you have encountered as a participant in the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy?”

• “Do you believe that your leadership skills or capacity has been grown as a result of participation in the leadership academy? If so, how? If not, what would have made the process better?”

• “Leadership self-efficacy is defined as “the leader’s awareness of, and confidence in, their abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to master the tasks involved in their leader role successfully. In terms of your own self-efficacy, do you believe that your efficacy has grown from the beginning of the year? If so, what factors do you attribute for the growth? If not, what do you perceive could help you promote growth in your self-efficacy?”

Responses for the Interviewee:

Responses will be audio recorded and transcribed using a confidential and reputable transcription services. Data will be stored digitally, and password protected to ensure security and confidentiality.
Demographic Survey

Research Project: Promoting the Professional Growth and Self-Efficacy of New Assistant Principals

The following demographic survey will allow for the researcher to better understand the study participants. This information is valuable in making connections and drawing conclusions within the purpose of the study. All identifiers will be removed in the findings section of the study in order to maintain confidence and confidentiality.

Demographic Information

- **Sex**
  - Male
  - Female

- **Race**
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - Asian or Asian American
  - Black or African American
  - Hispanic or Latino
  - Non-Hispanic White

- **Age**
  - 25-30 years
  - 31-35 years
  - 36-40 years
  - 41-45 years
  - 46-50 years
  - 51-55 years
  - 56-60 years
  - Age 60 or older

- **Years served as a teacher**
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-9 years
  - 10-15 years
  - 16-20 years
  - 20+ years

- **Subject area(s) taught:** ________________________________
• Grade level taught (select all that apply):
  o Pre-school
  o Elementary School
  o Middle School
  o High School

• Approximate number of students in your school who receive free or reduced lunch
  o 0-5%
  o 6-10%
  o 11-15%
  o 16-20%
  o 21-30%
  o 31-40%
  o 41-50%
  o 51-60%
  o 60-70%
  o 70% +

• Predominate racial composition of students in your school
  o American Indian or Alaska Native: _____
  o Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: _____
  o Asian or Asian American: ______
  o Black or African American: ______
  o Hispanic or Latino: ______
  o Non-Hispanic White: ______
APPENDIX F

SIGNED CONSENT FORM
SIGNED CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Study: Promoting Growth and Self-Efficacy in Assistant Principals

Researcher's Contact Information: Debra Cowart Murdock, 770.480.3420, dmurdoc1@kennesaw.edu

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Debra Murdock of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Description of Project

The purpose of the study is to examine the shared, lived experiences of new assistant principals who are participating in their school district’s leadership academy. The study will explore the assistant principals’ perceptions of their roles, responsibilities, expectations, professional growth and self-efficacy. The findings of this study could inform the professional learning and knowledge of school districts, educational leaders and/or colleges and universities in promoting growth and self-efficacy experiences for new assistant principals.

Explanation of Procedures

Each participant will be interviewed to collect his/her perceptions of the assistant principalship and participation in the leadership academy. The time, date and location of each interview will be determined by the participant. Interviews will be audiotaped to assure validity of the participants’ voices. All audiotapes will be secured to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Time Required

Each interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

Risks or Discomforts

There are no known risks or dangers from participation in the study. The risks of participation are anticipated to be consistent with the risks associated with ordinary daily tasks.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to the participant; however, the study could improve educational professional learning for and knowledge of assistant principals.
Compensation (if applicable)

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality

The results of this participation will be confidential. Participants will be assigned a randomized number that will serve as the reference for all collected participant data and known only by the researcher. Participants’ names and other identifying information will not be used in the study in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All data collected, including audiotaped interviews, will be kept secured on an external hard-drive and locked in a secure cabinet in the researcher’s office.

Inclusion Criteria for Participation

Participants from this study are included from a group of newly assigned assistant principals who are participating in a professional learning leadership academy in your suburban school district. All participants are new to the position but did participate in the district’s leadership academy for teacher leaders. Participation in the study is not a requirement of the leadership academy.

Signed Consent

I agree and give my consent to participate in this research project. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

__________________________________________________
Signature of Participant or Authorized Representative, Date

__________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator, Date

PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES OF THIS FORM, KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3403, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-2268.
APPENDIX G

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY DATA
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years as a Teacher</th>
<th>Content Areas on certificate</th>
<th>Current School Level</th>
<th>Prev School Level</th>
<th>Percentage F/R</th>
<th>School Racial Demographic</th>
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<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>N-H W M</td>
<td>10 to 15</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
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<td>21-30</td>
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<td>N-H W F</td>
<td>10 to 15</td>
<td>SPED</td>
<td>Elementary School Elementary School</td>
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<td>20+</td>
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<td>N-H W F</td>
<td>4 to 9</td>
<td>P-5: All Content</td>
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<td>N-H W F</td>
<td>16 to 20</td>
<td>P-5: All Content; Gifted</td>
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<td>N-H W F</td>
<td>4 to 9</td>
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<td>N-H W F</td>
<td>10 to 15</td>
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<td>Math; Leadership</td>
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