Spring 2-17-2021

An Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Elementary Assistant Principals Provided by Elementary Principals Within One Large Urban School District.

Adib Shakir
ashakir3@students.kennesaw.edu

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By

Adib S. Shakir

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Kennesaw State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education
in Educational Leadership
in the Bagwell College of Education

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

February 2021

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Approved:

_____
Dr. Chinasa Elue
(Committee Chair)

_____
Dr. Nicholas Clegorne
(Committee Member)

_____
Dr. Sheryl Croft
(Committee Member)

_____
Dr. Adrian Epps
Dean
College of Education

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenographical study was to explore the different ways that elementary assistant principals experienced mentoring from their elementary principals as a way to provide the requisite leadership development that would lead them to become a principal. This research study was conducted using in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data source. Ancillary data sources such as demographic surveys, reviewing district leadership secondary source documents, and researcher journal notes aided in the data triangulation and analysis. This study was guided by one main research question: What are the different ways elementary assistant principals experience mentoring from their elementary principals?

The research question posed allowed participants to illuminate their lived experiences about how elementary assistant principals experienced mentorship directly from their elementary principals. The prominent themes that emerged from the data were: a) assistant principal leadership development, b) principal leadership development, and c) mentorship perceptions. The findings established from this study were interpreted and presented in the context of this study's theoretical-conceptual framework and extant literature. Research implications for educational leadership and practice were also addressed and discussed.

Keywords: phenomenography, mentorship perceptions, elementary assistant principal development, principal leadership development, and school leader development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"I come as one but stand as ten thousand."

-Maya Angelou

To my dissertation committee: Dr. Chinasa Elue, my chair, and committee members: Dr. Sheryl Croft and Dr. Nicholas Clegorne, I express my gratitude. Thank you for your continual support, time, and care as I completed this dissertation. Your recommendations and guidance were not only supportive, but you all pushed my scholarly writing to a place I could never have imagined…WOW! I have undoubtedly grown as a scholar because you all not only saw my *potential* but made sure I *achieved* it; I am grateful - Thank you!

Thanks, are also due to Dr. Ivan Jorrin and Dr. Camille Sutton-Fox who nurtured my growth in qualitative research. Your expertise and fervor for qualitative research inflamed my *then* interest and *now* love of qualitative research.

I gratefully acknowledge the help provided by Dr. Clara Okoka, Dr. Theo Smith, Dr. Nancy Milledge, and Dr. Shelante Patton. Thank you for your continued encouragement, support, and your positive affirmations which propelled me to complete this study.

I acknowledge my appreciation to the participants who took part in this research study. Your perspectives effectuated this study. This work would not have been possible without each of you – Thank you!

DEDICATION

To all of my ancestors, whom I call upon daily for my strength. I was able to

achieve this because of you!

First, I give all honor and glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thank you for being my shield and giving me the strength, determination, and tenacity to complete this momentous academic achievement! There were times where I did not think that completing this degree would be possible, but great was your faithfulness to me. Finishing this great work affirmed that he who has begun a good work in you would see you through until completion (*Philippians 1:6*). I do not take for granted that you continue to bestow favor and grace over my life.

To my late maternal grandmother: Mrs. Maxine Hawkins, I also dedicate this achievement to you. You were always my greatest supporter. I marvel in astonishment because it was you who spoke this day into existence long before this achievement arrived. Continue to watch over me from above. I love you, eternally!

To all my family: Thank you all for your encouragement along the way. In many ways, your support of me was a motivating force that kept me going. I love you all!

To my sister, Latoya: Thank you for reminding me that God has a calling on my life and that he will make room for my gifts and talents. I love you to life!

To one of my top supporters, Nathan: You are the epitome of support! Thank you for your understanding, patience, and unwavering support as I completed this journey. I

absolutely could not have done this without you having you on my team. Love you to life!

To my friend LaTanya: You were one of my biggest supporters during this journey, and I am grateful for your supportive spirit and being able to make me laugh along the way on days when I was tired of writing. You are a great friend, and I love you for being such a great person and a fantastic friend!

To my dear friend, Mrs. Charlotte Simmons: You have been a prayer warrior, friend, and champion for my success since the day our paths crossed. Thank you both for your encouragement and supportive spirit that pushes me to be my absolute best. You are "one of a kind," and I am grateful for a friend like you!

To Ms. Beverly Patterson: Thank you for your encouragement and keeping me motivated along the way. You have been a great friend!

To my friend Jamar: Thank you for your friendship for the past 20+ years. More importantly, thank you for your courageous spirit that often reminded me that you had high expectations of me and your reminders that I needed to meet them – I love you, friend!

To my current principal, Mrs. Robin Christian: Thank you for your encouragement and support. I have learned a lot about leadership and myself because I had a chance to learn from you about a principal's role. Thank you!

Finally, this study is dedicated to the next person who skeptically wonders if they have what it takes to complete a dissertation. My advice to you is quite simple: You, too, can do this!

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The current call for increased accountability in education requires that schools have leaders equipped with a sufficient knowledge base that allows them to enhance the overall learning environment for students within a school (Branch et al., 2013; NAESP, 2013; Rice, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2012, 2013). The existing climate in education has significantly transformed into an environment where a school's success vastly depends upon the leadership strengths that exist among its leaders (Militello, 2015; Pounder & Crow, 2005). Research continues to assert that the principal's role is a primary determinant of a school's success (Malone & Caddell, 2000; Petzko, 2008; Rice 2010; Southern Regional Education Board, 2006; Wallace Foundation, 2006;).

While the predominant literature emphatically declares the principal's role and impact as an indispensable factor in the success or failure of a school, researchers Harris and Spillane (2006) also argued that effective principals are those who understand the importance of distributive leadership. These researchers posited that a principal's primary responsibility involves their "explicit and intentional use of distributive leadership, particularly with their assistant principals, to help establish the structures necessary to ensure a school is on a trajectory for success" (Harris & Spillane, 2006, p. 31). The role of the assistant principal is often referenced as the second in command in the hierarchy of school leadership (Marshall & Hooley, 2006), but according to Glanz (1994), more often than not, the assistant principal is the "forgotten man" (p. 283) in school leadership. Despite the overwhelmingly existing literature that speaks to the significance of cultivating and increasing the skill set and capacity of a principal's leadership, researchers also claim that exploring the assistant principal's leadership development is still an area within school leadership that needs further discussion (Hartzell et al., 1995; Glanz, 1994; Kwan, 2009; Olesewski et al., 2012).

Grissom and Harrington (2010) produced a study that emphasized how schools deliberately plan professional development opportunities for teachers; however, minimal consideration of professional learning often considers the specific needs of an assistant principal. Furthermore, research has also asserted that in many instances, countless assistant principals come into their role not prepared with the necessary skills and need the support of their principals to ensure success in this school leadership role (Barnett et al., 2012). Trail (2000) argued that the role of a principal is undoubtedly multi-faceted and utilizing core members of your leadership team helps to manage the many tasks that come with this job. On the contrary, Glanz (1994), along with others, asserted that the assistant principal's role is merely a role relegated to handling matters related to discipline, bus study, and managerial tasks (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Kwan, 2009; Watson, 2005; Weller & Weller, 2002).

However, research has continued to highlight that the principal's responsibility is to build and cultivate the leadership development of staff, particularly members of their leadership teams (Barnett et al., 2012; Kwan, 2009; McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002). Verily and Trail (2000) suggested that principals must work to develop stronger leadership teams that allow them to "not only share the lead but share the workload" (p. 4). Likewise, Hauseman and Pollock (2015) posited that the increasing complexities involved in the work of the principal require them to leverage opportunities that will allow them to build their school leadership team members' capacity to help manage the daily responsibilities and needs within a school.
 The responsibilities and role of an assistant principal are a direct result of how principals effectively utilize them within schools (Hillard & Newsome, 2013). Even more compelling is that many of the duties assigned to assistant principals are unclear and lack a clear focus on instructional leadership, often leading to uncertainty and confusion about their school leadership

role (Calabrese & Tucker-Ladd, 1991; Glanz, 2004; Marshall, 1992). All of which echoed the previous research that reiterated the experiences of an assistant principal often involved tasks that do not align with exposing them to the necessary leadership skills that prepare them to become a principal (Glanz, 1994; Hausman et al., 2002; Pounder & Crow, 2005; Weller & Weller, 2002).

Barnett et al. (2012) and Kwan (2009) both vehemently argued that the current work of an assistant principal, in many instances, is not adequately preparing these leaders for the role to become a principal. These researchers contended that an assistant principal's work should encompass a wide array of leadership areas, including instructional leadership, to build their overall leadership skills. Yet, nearly after five decades of exploring the role of an assistant principal, research continued to reveal the significant differences between the ideal responsibilities and the actual work of assistant principals transfers over daily in schools (Neumerski, 2013).

This chapter discusses the purpose of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, the conceptual framework of this study, the theoretical framework of this study, the rationale for the methodology, review of terms, delimitations, limitations, and organization of this study.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the lived experiences and conceptions that elementary assistant principals have about the mentorship received from their elementary principals through the lens of phenomenography (Marton, 1981). Furthermore, this study investigated the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals who desire to become a principal one day. It is acknowledged that not all assistant principals aspire to become a principal. Therefore, this study

only focused on those elementary assistant principals who expressed the aspiration to advance

their leadership role to the rank of becoming a principal. Moreover, this study also explored

areas related to how assistant principals received the necessary leadership development that

would prepare them to become a principal. Finally, this study examined several core areas that

affected an assistant principal's leadership. Specifically, this study reviewed the leadership

development of assistant principals, the influence of mentorship, and the duties and

responsibilities that are relegated to an assistant principal.

As previously referenced in the literature, the role and leadership development of an

assistant principals has been overlooked in the empirical research yet is one of the most

censorious job roles within a school that should be examined further (Davis et al., 2005; Glanz,

2004; Louis et al., 2010; Young et al., 2002). Holmes (1999) argued that assistant principals have

become an integral and vital part of school leadership, but their leadership pathway remains

imprecise. As the literature continued to express, the development of strong school leaders is a

crucial component for the success of a school, and a part of this development involved

understanding the leadership development of an assistant principal (Turnbull et al., 2016; Van

Soelen et al., 2019). This study analyzed the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant

principals and how mentorship allowed them to develop the necessary skills required for a

principal's role.

Problem Statement

For more than five decades, research has examined the role of school leadership and the

attributes that a school leader must possess to demonstrate effectiveness in this role (Austin &

Brown, 1970; Calabrese & Tucker-Ladd, 1991; Glanz, 1994; Gillespie, 1961; Harvey, 1994;

Kaplan & Owings, 1999; Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971; Paskey, 1989; Payako & Rorie, 1987; Reed

& Himmler, 1985; Retelle, 2010; Van Eman, 1926). An essential aspect of studying school leadership involves how school leaders exhibit the ability to transform the performance and the quality of the educational experience students receive within schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). This study's background was based on the contention that the pathway development for an assistant principal is predicated on how their principals mentor them.

Hauseman and Pollock (2015) described the work of a principal as one faced with many complexities. Fundamentally, the work of a principal requires the development of other leaders to aid in developing positive learning outcomes for a school community. Bolman and Deal (2002) suggested that because an assistant principal's role is ambiguous, many assistant principals face incomprehension and dejection as they navigate their work challenges. Similarly, Armstrong (2015) also argued that there is a specific need to understand how the development of an assistant principal is cultivated to examine how principals leverage the leadership skills that would prepare them for their next level of school leadership.

A considerable linchpin of effective school leadership has also centered around the impact that principals have on improving student achievement (Crow et al., 2011; Day & Sammons, 2013). Although there is a notable amount of literature that examined the importance of why effective principals are an important factor for leading schools, there is not an ample amount of literature that probed the role of assistant principals, and the leadership contributions they provide within schools (Fink & Silverman, 2014; Good, 2008; Lyons, 2019; Sun 2018). Indeed, existing research asseverated a lack of competent literature that specifically explored the role, preparation, and the leadership development provided to assistant principals (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). What makes the development for this argument more interesting is that principals most commonly advance from the ranks of those who were

once assistant principals, but there is an existing lack of discussion in the literature about how the leadership development of assistant principals prepared this group of individuals for a principal's role (Glanz, 2004; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

Research Question

This phenomenographical study addressed one main research question:

1) What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principal's experience mentoring from their elementary principals?

This methodology was used because approaching this topic from the lens of phenomenography allowed the researcher to develop a deep understanding about the conceptions and experiences that elementary assistant principals affixed to the mentoring experiences they received from their elementary principals (Marton, 1981; Stake, 2010). Furthermore, utilizing phenomenography as the research approach allowed the researcher to focus directly on the *experiences* elementary assistant principals shared from their mentoring as opposed to this study focusing on the essence of *mentorship* with its participants (Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton, 1981).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant to educational practitioners, school districts, and school leaders for numerous reasons. First, research has identified an existing gap in knowledge about the role of the assistant principal and their leadership within schools (Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Neumerski, 2013; Watson, 2005). Second, examining the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals provides an understanding of how the mentorship received from elementary principals influenced the leadership development an elementary assistant principal received that prepares them for a principal's role within a school (Lee et al., 2012). Third,

examining the lived experiences, perceptions, and conceptions that elementary assistant principals attached to their mentoring experiences provided a space for discussion about the role and influence of the dyadic relationship existing between an assistant principal and principal (Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton, 1981; Stake, 2010; Naidoo et al., 2011; Kram, 1983). Finally, examining the role and development of elementary assistant principals, this research expanded the existing literature in the following ways:

1. Introduced a new perspective highlighting the specific job role of elementary assistant principals.

2. Provided a lived descriptive account from the perspectives of elementary assistant principals, and how they experience mentoring from their elementary principals.

3. Provided elementary principals with new insights into their unique role in terms of mentorship, and how they develop their elementary assistant principals.

A broader view of the aspect of mentoring that would serve as a useful tool for school districts is provided. Finally, the implications of this research topic could influence the leadership pipeline for future school leaders and provide a framework for school districts to use in the development of leadership programs that influence how assistant principals meet current demands required for today's principals.

Conceptual Framework

According to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), the use of a conceptual framework helps substantiate a researcher's topic and affirms its importance as a viable topic of exploration. This study used a conceptual framework that examined both learning and epistemological constructs to strengthen the development of this framework. Research on the topic continues to posit that the leadership traits of principals play a consequential part in the overall success or failure of a

school (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019). However, a considerable amount of the existing literature on school leadership focused solely on the principal and their leadership development. While the primary emphasis in school leadership seemingly remains concentrated on the leadership attributes, a principal contributes to a school.

Researchers such as Searby et al. (2017) argued that the role of the assistant principal is essential but is a position that is not discussed within the research literature. Furthermore, authors Oleszewski et al. (2012) reinforced the assertion of Searby et. al (2017) when these researchers contended that a significant factor in a school's overall improvement relies on the role that the assistant principal has in assisting a principal's efforts towards school improvement.

The conceptual framework used in this study emerged from aspects of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) and the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Graen & Bien, 1984). Both of these theories are grounded in the belief that it is through the direct interaction between individuals that one begins to develop and connect meanings from their experiences. By extracting key ideas from these theories, a framework was formed that explored the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals. Further, to make this conceptual framework more appropriate for this topic, it was adduced that the vital acquisition of an elementary assistant principal's leadership development and the competencies needed to become a successful principal is modeled, coached, reinforced, and mentored by their principal.

In formulating the theoretical perspective for studying the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals, both Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) provided a useful construct for advancing the main ideas that drove this research focus. SLT and LMX both have components akin to the epistemological assumptions of constructivism, a fundamental theory founded on observation, and the scientific

study about how individuals learn (Merriam & Carafella, 1999). A noteworthy tenet of constructivism is that learning should be an ongoing process whereby individuals continually acquire new knowledge based on their current and past (experiences) and interactions (Hoover, 1996). Mertens (2015) also asserted that a focal point of constructivism comes from how individuals construct meanings of their experiences from the world in which they live, and from the viewpoint of those individuals who have lived the experience. This understanding supported the claim that elementary assistant principals draw an individualized understanding of how they experience mentoring from their principals, and how this mentoring experience frames their leadership development and preparation for a principal's role.

Methodology

This phenomenographical study sought to chronicle and understand the experiences, perceptions, and conceptions that elementary assistant principals have about the mentorship they received from their elementary principals that prepared them for a principal's role. Newman and Benz (1998) asserted that qualitative research seeks to explore the phenomenon under study in an intimate way. This study used a qualitative research approach to examine the experiences of elementary assistant principals' and their experiences of how they experienced mentorship from their elementary principals. The use of a qualitative design was appropriate for this study because this study was descriptive and sought to describe the essence of a particular phenomenon (Stake, 2010).

Moreover, the research approach of phenomenography was used to explore this topic. Phenomenography, as a research approach, is a relevant methodology to use when a researcher seeks to examine and analyze the different ways in which an individual experienced a specific phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Utilizing a phenomenographical approach to explore this topic was

appropriate because the essence of exploration involved understanding the different realities that elementary assistant principals and elementary principals have about mentorship (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Major & Savin-Baden, 2013).

In addition, this qualitative study investigated if there are similarities or differences in the emerging perceptions that elementary assistant principals and elementary principals had about the role of mentorship and its influence on developing the leadership skills for elementary assistant principals. The results from this study contributed to the body of research aimed at providing a more in-depth examination of the role of the assistant principal, perceptions of mentorship, and the influence that mentorship has on the leadership development for elementary assistant principals.

Review of Relevant Terms

This section discussed the relevant vocabulary that will be utilized in this study. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), a researcher should identify terminology that is of significance to establish a basis of understanding and operationally discussed in your study. The definitions listed below ensured cohesion and understanding of terms used throughout this study.

Assistant Principal. The entry-level position and generally the first formal position held by an individual who has not had any prior school-based administrative experience (Marshall & Hooley, p. 1).

Leadership Development. London (2002) defined leadership development from two distinct perspectives: organizational and individual. *Organization leadership development* involves an examination of the current skills and competencies within an organization and analyzing the future needs of an organization. *Individual leadership development* refers to appraising the talents of an individual and develops a plan for addressing areas of improvement. For the

purpose of this study, the term *leadership development* describes the experiences that elementary assistant principals have about their career development.

***Mentorship/Mentoring*.** For the purpose of this study, the term mentorship, mentoring, and mentor will be used interchangeably. According to Kram (1985) mentorship is defined as the "providing scholarship, exposure, visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments or activities that directly relate to the mentee/protégés career advancement" (Kram, 1985).

Mentor. For this study, the term mentor will be used to describe the work of an elementary level principal who supports the aspirations of an assistant principal who seeks to expand their knowledge and skills in leadership to acquire the needed skills to become a principal effectively (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

***Mentee/ Protégé*.** For the purpose of this study, the term mentee/protégé will be used interchangeably and are defined as an individual(s) who "actively participates in the mutual relationship established between the mentor and mentee/protégé" (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010, as cited in Walkington, 2005, p. 49).

***Phenomenography*.** Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that aims to identify the different ways in which participants have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton, 1981).

Principal. The main school leader who supervises the overall instructional, operational, management, and development of staff within a school environment (DuFour & DuFour, 2012).

Delimitations

There is a recognition that all research studies have delimitations. First, this study only explores the experiences of elementary assistant principals and elementary principals. Second, this study uniquely focused on the lived experiences of elementary assistant principals and

elementary principals and the mentorship that elementary assistant principals received from their elementary principals. Third, the school district used in this study was based on the convenience and access to this researcher. Finally, when collecting data within one school district, certain postulations or findings cannot be used to generalize the results from this study.

Limitations

It is also acknowledged that the qualitative research methods employed in this study had limitations. One limitation is this researcher's current position as an assistant principal within the school district under investigation. Second, research participants may not feel comfortable or convey complete honesty about their experiences of the mentorship they receive from their principals. Third, utilizing a qualitative research methodology does not establish causality with the anticipated research findings. Lastly, results about the perceptions of elementary assistant principals and elementary principals cannot be generalized to other elementary assistant principal and elementary principals within or outside of the school district used in this study.

Chapter Summary

Chapter one presented the background and purpose of this study, as well as the statement of the problem, research questions, conceptual framework, research methodology, review of relevant terms, the definition of terms, and a description of the limitations, and delimitations for this study. Chapter two presents the salient literature to include mentorship and leader development, the history of mentorship, the assistant principal's role, the role of the principal, and mentorship development for both assistant principals and principals. Chapter three contains the research traditions and worldviews, participant information, instruments used, the process for data collection, and trustworthiness and this. Chapter four describes the research findings, participant information, and the organization of themes and sub-themes from the research results

of this phenomenographical study. Finally, chapter five details the conclusion, implications, and

future research recommendations, as identified from the research findings.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter Two presents an overview of the research on the assistant principal (AP) and how they are developed in their leadership preparation. More specifically, this chapter reviewed empirical literature that discussed the AP's leadership development and how these school leaders receive the necessary training that prepares them to become a principal. The AP position is most often the necessitous step in a school leader's career advancement when the aspiration is to become a principal. Yet, while this role outwardly serves as the ideal apprenticeship to becoming a principal, research has continued to indicate this leadership role as one of the most impenetrable roles within education (Shoho, 2012; Oliver; 2005; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Reed & Himmler, 1985 Workman, 2013).

According to Ribbons (1997), the AP position is a "difficult role to sustain in a school where other leadership roles seemed to be overshadowing it" (p. 298). Similarly, Glanz (1994) and Harvey (1994) described the AP as an underused and imperceptible school leader. Furthermore, research has also posited that APs often encounter unclear expectations in their job role, lack the appropriate leadership development by their principal, and are often inadequately prepared to assume the position of a principal (Hartzell et al., 1995; Marshall, 1992; Mertz and McNeely, 1999; Shoho et al., 2012). Previous research has avowed the need to further explore the APs role and the leadership development provided that would prepare them for their next level of leadership (Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Militello et al., 2015; Shoho et al., 2012). However, a dearth of literature exists that identifies the leadership developmental needs and perspectives of this group of leaders and their leadership preparation for the role to become a principal (Shoho, 2012; Daresh, 2004; Hillard & Newsome, 2013; Stein; 2006).

Furthermore, publications from the following databases were used to examine the existing literature regarding the role, leadership development, and the mentoring experiences of APs: EBSCO HOST, Education Research Information (ERIC), ProQuest, JSTOR, and Emerald Insights. A Google Scholar search was also utilized to locate additional literature for the research topic under study. The literature search included various keywords within these databases related to the question of exploration, first using broader key terms, and then narrowing the search's scope to analyze salient literature pertinent to the AP's role and position.

The following topics were searched: historical perspective and evolution of the assistant principal, the role of the assistant principal, the professional development of the assistant principal, the role of the principal, and the mentorship and development of the assistant principal. The searching for literature on this research topic revealed a minimal amount of research conducted within the past 10 years that explicitly examined how principal mentorship influences leadership development for APs. Thus, this study includes an analysis of literature older than 10 years, but it is still pertinent and significant for this study's purpose.

Finally, ancillary descriptors related to social learning and supervisor-subordinate relationships were explored to identify the theories that will help develop the conceptual framework that guided this research study. This chapter includes a comprehensive examination of the theoretical framework and the topical research that will serve as the foundation for this study. Categorically, the thematic research review consisted of an analysis of empirical studies on 1) historical perspectives of the AP; 2) the role and responsibilities of the AP; 3) AP professional development; 4) role of the principal; 5) mentorship of the AP; 6) social learning theory, and 7) leader-member exchange theory.

Historical Overview of the Literature on the Role of the AP

To fully understand the role of the assistant principal (AP), it is quintessential to understand the evolution of how the AP emerged in education. The AP position did not evolve as a part of school leadership from the beginning of schooling in the United States (Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971). The emergence of this role grew from the drastic changes that began to occur in education during the 20th century, such as school enrollment, increased number of teachers, and the general education services that schools started to provide for students (Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Mertz and McNeely (1999) posited that the role of the AP grew out of a need for efficiency to support the ever-increasing enrollments schools faced during the 20th century with little emphasis placed on how this role would effectively serve as an additional school leader to the principal. Earlier studies indicated that the AP position's purpose was to support principals with the growing tasks required to run a school environment (Glanz, 1994; Greenfield, 1985; Harvey, 1994; Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971).

The increasing enrollment within schools during the 1900s was the first time that research began to see the emergence of the AP position (Glanz, 1994; Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971). According to Harris and Lowery (2004), "records are unclear" as to the first documented date of when the AP position evolved into existence (p.1). Notwithstanding, Glanz (1994) speculated that the establishment of the AP role surfaced in education on or around the 1920s, which is later substantiated by the works of other researchers (for example, Matthew & Crow, 2003; Harris & Lowery, 2004). Historically, the role of the assistant principal emerged in education as a way to address the increasing enrollment of students primarily within secondary schools (Glanz, 1994; Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971). Empirical literature that discussed the assistant principal's role dates back to 1926 and links to the seminal works of Van Eman. In his

study, Van Eman (1926) investigated the job function of the then executive assistant but later acknowledged in research as the assistant principal (Van Eman, 1926 as cited in Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971).

While research provided some context around how the APs role emerged within education, there remained a scarcity of research understanding this leadership role within schools from its inception. Panyako and Rorie (1987) argued a viable reason for the lack of information on the role of the AP stemmed from a historical lack of interest in understanding the purpose of this school leader. More specifically, earlier studies addressed school leadership from appraising the principal with very little to no emphasis placed on understanding the role of the AP (Marshall & Greenfield, 1985; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Spady, 1985). Further, research conducted by Shoho et al. (2012) affirmed the earlier conclusions implied by Panyako and Rorie (1987) and reinforced that early research on school leadership primarily focused on understanding the leadership competencies of the school principal.

The AP often recognized as a school leader who carries out fortuitous tasks as assigned by the principal has continually spurred intellectual discussions among scholars about the relevance of this position and its influence on school leadership (Hillard & Newsome, 2013; Stein; 2006; Weller & Weller, 2002). Early researchers posited that the role of the AP evolved because the school principal needed relief from the many daunting administrative tasks that was now becoming a part of the work required for a school leader (Glanz, 1994; Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971). Researchers such as (Austin & Brown, 1970; Glanz, 1994; Harvey, 1994; and Van Eman, 1926) have notably made seminal contributions exploring the APs role and have described this role as a leader without clear direction or a solid focus on affecting the overall academic achievement in a school. Despite the prevalence of research that exists exploring the AP, extant

research continued to profess a need for additional studies exploring the APs unique role and particularly their leadership development to understand how these school leaders receive adequate leadership preparation (Glanz, 1994; Greenfield, 1985; Harvey, 1994; Marshall & Greenfield, 1985; Peters et al., 2016).

According to Harvey (1994), the AP position serves as a direct support person to the principal. Similarly, research by Glanz (1994) supported the description given of an AP by Harvey (1994), but also extended the discussion and argued that the primary duties and responsibilities delegated to APs are menial in scope and do not lead to enhancing their overall leadership development. Glanz (1994) also contended that the AP position materialized from a need of principals recognizing that additional support would be beneficial for supporting the daily management, administrative, and operational needs in a school (Oliver, 2005). While this role seemingly fulfilled the immediate requirement for school support, research has steadily maintained that principals continued to negate this position as a pathway opportunity for advancing the leadership skillset of APs that aids in developing their leadership prowess (Gillespie, 1961; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Oliver, 2005). Collectively, researchers such as (Armstrong, 2009; Greenfield, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Moore, 2009; Reed & Himmler, 1985) all agreed that defining the role of an AP remains vacillating and a significant degree of ambiguity exists when trying to understand how APs receive ongoing leadership development while in this role.

It was not until around the mid-1950s that research began to precipitate an interest in understanding the role and functionality of the AP within schools (Gillespie, 1961). Panyako and Rorie (1987) surmised that before the 1950s, the historical context of school leadership focused primarily on the school principal. These researchers presented an argument that suggested the

leadership of the principal referred to as the "chief executive officer" within a school overshadowed the AP position, which made the AP an "invisible" member among the school leadership team (p. 6). One implication from the analysis of Panyako and Rorie (1987) later established by Glanz (1994) posited that research continued to affirm the role of the AP as the "*forgotten man*" in school leadership and there exists a need to investigate additional aspects of the leadership development provided to APs (p. 283).

Interestingly, Mertz and McNeely (1999) and Weller and Weller (2002) contended that while the assistant principal's role seemingly addressed the immediate call for school support, there remained unclear expectations about how this role universally operates within schools. Previous studies have indicated that the work of the AP primarily encompassed tasks that focus on school operations and lack a shared duality of responsibilities of all school leadership aspects with the principal, particularly instructional leadership (Glanz, 1994; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Weller and Weller, 2002; Kwan 2009). Notwithstanding the continuance of this position within schools, research has emphatically argued that minimal studies exist that explicitly catechize how APs receive the necessary leadership advancement training or experiences from their principals (Busch et al., 2010 as cited in Oleszewski et al., 2012; Mertz, 2006; Kwan, 2009).

Furthermore, existing research lacks supporting evidence of how assistant principals receive the leadership development necessary preparing them for the role to become a principal (Armstrong, 2009; Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Greenfield, 1985; Oleszewski et al., 2011; Reed & Himmler, 1985; Weller & Weller, 2002). Both Mertz (2006) and Oleszewski (2012) mutually agreed in their research findings that a presumption for most principals is that they do not see their AP as a future principal. Contemporaneously, Armstrong (2009) and Good (2008) both recommended that analyzing the needs, leadership development, and understanding how APs

receive ongoing career development can enrich the discussion within the existing literature and provide a more comprehensive understanding of this school leader's role in schools. Withal, research has also suggested that the position of an AP is so complex and confining that many of these leaders are either not adequately prepared or lack the desire to become a principal due to their experiences (Kwan, 2009; Militello et al., 2015; Oleszewski, 2012). The conclusion of these researchers connects to the implications that Mertz (2006) and Oleszewski (2012) stated regarding the leadership preparedness APs receive that prepared them to become a principal.

Even more disputed is the acknowledged research that adamantly declares an obligation to advance the discussions about the role of the AP and how their leadership development enables their readiness to become a principal (for example Marshall et al., 1994; Jayne, 1996; Oliver, 2005; Owen-Fitzgerald, 2010; Webb & Vulliamy, 1995). By using this research, which generally focused on the lack of leadership preparation or training development afforded to APs, we can begin to establish the existing gap that currently exists in the literature about the development of the AP role. In summary, the research discussed unequivocally declared the need to approach the investigation of the AP from the stance of seeking to gain a more in-depth perspective about their leadership development and experiences that sufficiently or insufficiently prepare them for the role of the principal.

The Role and Delineated Responsibilities of the Assistant Principal

Existing research inadequately addresses or provides an objective definition of the role of an assistant principal (Rogers, 2009; Kwan, 2009; Nieuwenhuizen & Brooks, 2013). This insufficient understanding of the APs position creates a myriad of questions about the vast range of duties, responsibilities, and experiences that exist between each AP (Iannaccone, 1985; Hess, 1985; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Celik, 2013). According to Morgan (2018), the APs role is

constraining due to its "inadequate job description," and the enigmatic practices this position operationally defines in schools, coupled with the proficiency skills needed to perform in this role effectively (p. 4). Prior studies have continued to make the argument that the role of the AP is one of the most perplexing roles in education today (see Armstrong, 2009; Glanz, 1994; Good, 2008; Kwan, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski, 2012; Oliver, 2005). Moreover, researchers have concluded the AP role as an ambiguous leadership position due to the ever-changing and unclear nature of their job role (Celik, 2013; Cohen & Schechter, 2019).

Glanz (1994) described the AP as a "general supervisor" whose main priority was the management of clerical duties, custodial duties, and student management (discipline)," leaving virtually no opportunity for any engagement with instructional leadership (p.86). Mertz and McNeely (1999) stated that the assistant principal position merely serves as an administrative aide who oversees and manages the undesirable tasks delegated to them by the principal. Marshall and Holley (2006); Kwan (2009); Wong (2009); and Oleszewski et al., (2012) all characterized the AP as an underrepresented school leader routinely confined in a box of carrying out mundane tasks, which inhibits the opportunity for an AP to gain experience expanding both their leadership voice and stance within a school environment. Similarly, Armstrong (2009) postulated that many new assistant principals experience a higher degree of uncertainty about their role due to the ambiguous nature of the duties and tasks assigned to an assistant principal within in the school.

Goodson (2000) debated that the AP's role should serve a two-fold purpose: learning the effective management of the overall school administration and an apprenticeship for building the needed skills to one day become a principal. Goodson (2000) articulated the need for APs to experience advanced leadership preparation as a part of their job role. Research has also

advocated that a part of this additional leadership experience come from the direct delegation of leadership responsibilities from the principal (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Contrarily, Scoggins and Bishop (1993) affirmed that most of the job duties that APs engage in do not necessarily build their leadership capacity, but rather focus on general building management, extracurricular activities, staff support, and student management. These researchers did not find a clear connection to the job-embedded experiences for assistant principals advancing their leadership knowledge.

Research produced by Sun and Soho (2017) summed up the work of the AP in a variety of phrases such as the "handyman," "activity coordinator," "disciplinarian," and "policeman" (p. 457). These researchers declared that the work of an AP merely lends itself to serving as the gatekeeper for helping to maintain a safe and orderly school environment. Lee et al., (2009) argued that the role of the AP is daunting because the overall job description lacks a conceptual foundation for understanding the many complexities ingrained in the actual *versus* realized work of the AP. To add, both Mertz (2006) and Morgan (2014) reinforced Lee et al., (2009) findings but included a discussion that emphasized how APs experience different job expectations relative to their assigned working location.

The preponderance of research evidence continued to suggest that the role of the AP is imprecise and obscure (see Armstrong, 2009; Celik, 2013; Goodson, 2000; Glanz, 1994; Lee et al., 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Morgan, 2014; Mertz, 2006; Scoggins & Bishop, 1993; and Sun & Soho, 2017). While the tone of the research literature maintained that the role of an AP is an upward movement in the career trajectory of an aspiring principal, research has persistently argued that the actualization of this job role does not align with the ideal conceptions of the intended purpose for this position (Arar, 2014; Cranston et al., 2004; Morgan, 2018). Numerous

studies have directly stated that AP's role is a functioning role without the foundational understanding of its leadership purpose (Lee et al., 2009; Mertz, 2006). Research has also reported that the job role is contingent upon the experiences and responsibilities delegated to them by their principals (Lee et al., 2009; Mertz, 2006; Morgan, 2014). In short, as memorialized throughout existing research, the role of the AP continues to be one of the most obscure job roles within the field of education.

Assistant Principal Role Ambiguity

The sentiment prevails in the literature that the AP position as an ambiguous school leader (Armstrong, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Nieuwenhuizen & Brooks, 2013; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Soho, 2012). Many factors that exacerbate the ambiguity of this job role relates to the numerous functions and responsibilities APs must execute daily within their schools. Merriam Webster defines ambiguous as an adjective used to describe "open or several possible meanings" (Merriam Webster, 2020). By using this simplified description of this term, researchers have pervasively attached the job responsibilities of an AP as one that entails having to navigate many daily tasks assigned at the discretion of their immediate supervisor. Even more, the mere fact that contextual differences exist among the wide range of experiences, skills, and the leadership development acquired by APs further illuminated the complexity of this job role (Celik, 2013; Morgan, 2018).

As an example, Marshall and Hooley (2006) applied an actionable definition of how ambiguity relates to the current experiences and realities for APs. More precisely, in their seminal work, *The Assistant Principal: Leadership Choices and Challenges*, these researchers defined the *role ambiguity* of an assistant principal's positions and duties include many "gray areas – ill-defined, inconsistent, and at times incoherent responsibilities, positions and

resources." For example, assistant principals' responsibilities may not include employing substitutes but may include handling the problems that ensure when substitutes are not screened (p. 7).

These researchers explained their description of ambiguity directly aligned to the lived experiences of APs because the myriad of duties and responsibilities often presented APs with an increased level of frustration and confusion with understanding their leadership role. Additionally, these researchers also speculated that the increasing and multi-faceted duties of an assistant principal led to a "lack of job satisfaction," "emotional problems," or feeling "ineffective" (p. 7). Lastly, these researchers also reported that APs also experience a sense of role conflict resulting from the lack of clearly having a set of delineated duties and responsibilities.

Armstrong (2015) identified and discussed the elements of ambiguity that many APs experience in their job role. In this research study, an integrative approach was used to analyze newly appointed assistant principals' work conditions and how they navigated the terrain of their daily job responsibilities. A major finding in this study included an ambiguous structure for how the AP role is constructed. These researchers also discussed factors that promoted an increased experience of ambiguity.

Additionally, it was determined that factors contributing to job-related ambiguity experienced by APs included the following findings:

1. Lack of a specific job description describing the specific job duties.

2. Imprecise preparation for the daily managerial and disciplinary role an AP has in a school.

3. Inadequately prepared for the overall transition into school leadership that sufficiently situated their leadership role within a school context.

Finally, implications from this study also suggested that an AP's primary expectation is to perform tasks that, at the discretion of the principal, this can lead to feelings of dissonance as APs are often inadequately prepared to manage these many frontline job tasks. Morgan (2014) argued that an AP position is a role that usually involved "putting out fires" within a school and not fully maximized in other leadership areas (Cohen & Schechter, 2019, p. 101). The results from this study further supported the earlier criticisms raised in the literature that APs consistently experience encounters where the expectation is to perform optimally within their role, but the support needed to ensure a successful transition into the complexity of leadership remains scarce (for example, Armstrong, 2012, 2015; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Shoho et al., 2012).

Responsibilities of the Assistant Principal (AP)

The research literature is rife with studies that speak to the perplexity that exists around understanding the role of the AP in schools (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Shoho et al., 2012). According to Hausman et al. (2002), there is a minimal understanding about this role and its impact on increasing the success of a school. Reed (2011) argued that the position of an AP failed to provide the appropriate training needed that advanced the skills required for an AP to one day become a principal. Armstrong (2015) also contended that APs persistently face challenges as they transition into their administrative role, particularly new APs, because structures are often not in place to ensure their success for the convoluted requirements of this job role. Johnson-Taylor and Martin (2007) strengthened Armstrong's (2015) viewpoint regarding the AP when these researchers surmised that the role of the AP narrowly focused on

clerical tasks, student discipline, and other miscellaneous relegated tasks assigned by the principal.

Furthermore, research has postulated that the position of the AP is an onerous job to understand because the gamut of responsibilities ranges from general school management to instructional related tasks (Glanz, 1994; Barnett et al., 2012; Marshall & Holley, 2006; Armstrong, 2004; Reed, 2011; Soho et al., 2012). Moreover, the work of an AP centers around what principals deem as essential duties, and not necessarily correlating responsibilities based on the data-driven needs of the school (Barnett et al., 2012; Cohen & Schecter, 2019; Harvey, 1994; Mertz, 2006; Morgan, 2014). One of the first seminal studies that discussed the role of the AP first emerged within research in 1925. Van Tuyle (2018) examined the earlier work of Schroeder (1925), who explored the responsibilities and the leadership of the AP within schools.

Van Tuyle (2018) discussed Schroeder's (1925) findings, which raised an insightful debate around providing APs with tasks that provide a broader scope of leadership responsibility, thus increasing their leadership capacity. As well, Schroeder's (1925) investigation into the AP role also revealed that many of the assigned tasks were limited to managerial or clerical-type duties. The results of this research supported the generalizations found across other studies, which affirmed the work of an AP is often narrow in scope and limits their overall ability to learn additional areas of school leadership (Armstrong, 2009; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Reed, 2011; Shoho et al., 2012).

In their 1970 study conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 1970), APs were surveyed to gauge their overall focus areas of responsibilities in terms of their daily school leadership support. The results of this study reported that the vast majority of APs spent most of their time addressing school-related job

tasks that primarily concentrated around pupil services (e.g., discipline, general supervision, and routine building management). This research study also indicated that while the most prevalent responsibilities of an AP included general supervisory related tasks, APs reported that they were also interested in opportunities that afforded them experience in the school aspects of supporting curriculum and instruction. The results from this study justified a need for future research to examine how APs receive opportunities to enhance their skills in other aspects of school leadership.

Glanz (1994) produced a research study that primarily examined the significant responsibilities and duties delegated to assistant principals. This research study sampled 200 APs from the New York City public school district. A significant finding from this study reported that 90% of respondents stated that they would like to have more opportunities to work with instructional and curriculum aspects of supporting teachers. However, the majority of their role entailed executing aspects of managerial leadership, which primarily included student discipline and building operations. An implication of this study's findings can connect to the conclusion that Hausman et al. (2002) hypothesized in their study that the AP's fundamental role does not correlate to the goal for helping to increase overall student achievement within schools.

Armstrong's (2004) study surmised that the current realities of the AP position needed restructuring to ensure that this job role actively participates in school-wide improvement tasks, strengthening the increasing support provided to teachers that support their improvement with teaching and learning. This study revealed that APs engage in a broad spectrum of duties and responsibilities that include, but not limited to:

1. campus and school safety,
2. student activities,

3. building management/maintenance,

4. student discipline,

5. student attendance,

6. teacher evaluation, and

7. monitoring and supervising school-sponsored events.

Respectively, Marshall and Holley's (2006) work explored the span of duties and responsibilities of APs concluded that the majority of the tasks assigned to APs are often isolated to four general categories: (a) mitigating parent and student concerns, (b) management of student behavior, (c) developing master instructional schedules, and (d) managing student discipline. Comparably, Kwan's (2009) investigation into the tasks assigned to APs also stated that most of their job responsibilities consistently identified with one of the following themes:

1. external communication.

2. quality assurance and accountability.

3. Teaching or supporting teacher effective practices.

4. curriculum and learning.

5. Resource and fiscal management.

6. leader and teacher growth and development (staff evaluation); and

7. staff management (Kwan, 2009, p. 202).

Evidence from the existing literature continued to demonstrate that the AP's current responsibilities focused on tasks akin to student discipline and general administrative school-related functions. The results of the ineffective and underutilized ways APs support schools has sparked a drastic outcry to evaluate the role of an AP to ensure that this school leader can support the efforts to improve the academic achievement for the needs of the 21st-century school

environment (Armstrong, 2009; Hausman et al., 2002; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Peters et al. 2016; Shoho et al., 2012). Table 1 is an analysis of previous studies discussed and others regarding the duties of the AP.

Table 1

Assistant Principal Job Responsibilities

Researcher (year)	Study Sample Probed	Primary AP Responsibilities
Kriekard (1987)	263 APs sampled using the Performance Evaluation of Educational Leaders (PEEL) tool	Management of school management student and parent concerns Teacher evaluation Student management and behavior
Glanz (1994)	200 APs from New York City Public Schools	Student discipline Lunch duty School Scheduling Ordering textbooks/resources Parental conferences School-wide Assemblies Administrative duties Logistical duties Evaluation of teachers Student attendance
Hauseman et al. (2002)	125 Public and Private School District's APs from Maine	Student management Interactions with education hierarchy Personnel management Public relations Professional development Resource Management Instructional leadership
Kwan (2009)	331 APs in Hong Kong, China	Resource management Teaching and curriculum management Leader and teacher development Student discipline School Policies
Sun (2011)	133 APs New York City Board of Education	Instructional leadership Teacher Evaluation Student discipline Administrative functions Counseling students Staff development

Assistant Principal Professional Development

The professional development of an AP is a crucial part of their overall leadership growth. According to Marshall and Holley (2006), very few school districts provide the necessary professional development for APs that aid in increasing their overall leadership abilities. Additionally, there is a dire need for the continuation of professional development opportunities that enhance the current expertise of principals while also preparing the next group of rising school leaders that one day will transition into the principalship role (Johnson, 2004; Olson, 2008; Wallin, 2006).

Moreover, the increased call for educational leaders to enhance their proficiency in instructional leadership has now sparked a demand for school leaders with an improved dexterity in the area of instructional leadership (Barnett, 2004; Burch, 2007; Olson, 2008, Wallin, 2006). Research conducted by Kearney and Herrington (2013) suggested that a widely known gap exists between what APs need to increase their leadership development versus current professional development opportunities provided to APs that lack all required instructional focus areas to meet the current educational demands. Lastly, the research literature affirmed that professional development solely from a university-level preparation program lacks the necessary sufficiency to support the growing developmental needs for an AP (Enomoto, 2012; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Walker & Qian, 2006).

Marshall and Hooley (2006) further contributed to the conversation regarding AP development by stating that building principals must utilize intentional methods and provide an assistant principal with the needed opportunities to sharpen their leadership abilities. The intentionality behind developing an assistant principal's leadership skills reinforces existing literature that asserts effective school leadership encompasses contributions from members of a

school's leadership team, which includes both the principal and assistant principal (Aguilar, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2010). Nakai (2005) further suggested that principals use a systematic approach to undertake the development and training needs of their assistant principals. More specifically, these researchers declared that the focus of leadership development involved providing assistant principals with opportunities that not only enhance their leadership skills but are also opportunities designed to engage both assistant principals and principals in a shared learning experience.

According to research produced by Stein (2006), there is now a call for principals to begin examining how they utilize the work and leadership support of APs within schools. These researchers argued that principals must rethink how they use assistant principals and provide assistant principals with opportunities to increase their expertise in instructional leadership. Similarly, Hillard and Newsome (2013) later conducted a study that reinforced Stein's (2006) previous implications when these researchers contended that the assistant principal's role should not merely be a role relegated to the daily duties of managing student discipline, organizing buses, or being a building manager. These researchers argued that principals must ensure that their APs receive the appropriate training and leadership development that positively influences the teaching and learning outcomes for students in schools.

Comparably, the work of Nieuwenhuizen and Brooks (2013) also asserted that the primary role relegated to the position of an AP merely consists of tasks related to general school management. These researchers identified that APs spend a considerable amount of time dealing with managerial tasks focused on school and student management.

Also, Retelle (2010) posited that principals who focused on developing their APs do so by providing assistant principals with leadership experiences. By providing ongoing leadership

development, the principal then serves as a coach or mentor and support assistant principals in synthesizing their learning. Bloom and Krovetz (2009) also stressed that a principal's crucial responsibility is to ensure that they develop their assistant principals for becoming a principal reinforcing. These researchers reinforced the viewpoints of Retelle (2010) in recognizing that mentorship is a decisive element that principals utilize to further build the skill set of an assistant principal. Payne and Huffman (2005) also agreed that mentoring is a way of cultivating an individual's ability, enhancing their skills and orients them to their specific job role and responsibilities. In summary, incorporating mentorship as a practice of leadership development is a strategy that Fullick-Jagiela et al. (2015) referred to as the opportunity to teach, grow, and broaden the skills of an individual within any organization.

It is also important to discuss that the dramatic shift in education has called for all school leaders to possess the proficiency and competencies necessary that support a successful environment for student learning and achievement within schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Spanneut et al. (2012) argued that the shift in educational leadership now placed a heightened focus on the principal's instructional leadership skills, thus resulting in the AP's opportunity to develop their leadership skillset as the second in command in supporting the leadership of the school (Ng, 2013). Even more provocative, Hutton (2012) argued that teachers "continually receive professional development opportunities" designed to increase their skills (p .1). Yet, APs rarely received any professional development in the areas to which they supervise. Researchers Muijs and Harris (2003) and Hutton (2012) agreed that the type of work assigned to APs, coupled with their lack of professional development opportunities, leads to an AP's ill preparedness to advance in their leadership role. The results of these studies clearly misaligned

to the implications that Ng (2013) later argued in their research about professional development being an inclusive practice designed to enhance the overall collaboration between school leaders.

In their study, Yu-kwon and Walker (2010) sought to examine the job effectiveness of a group of assistant principals in Hong Kong. One thought-provoking discovery in this research showed that most professional development opportunities focused on the needs of principals and excluded the assistant principal. Similarly, Ng (2013) produced a study that examined some of the leadership traits needed for aspiring principals. The recommendations that arose from Ng's (2013) study conveyed that professional development opportunities should include on-the-job training and off-site training development to bolster the interpersonal and problem-solving skills of an aspiring principal. Additionally, this study recommended that a purposeful professional development program recognized and deliberatively included the approach of distributed leadership in schools that empowered the leadership skills of assistant principals and fostered teamwork.

Assistant Principal Instructional Leadership

Marshall and Hooley (2006) posited that, to date, there remains limited information that examines the knowledge and skills of an assistant principal, particularly in the area of instructional leadership. According to DuFour (2002), "educators are gradually redefining the role of the principal from instructional leader with a focus on teaching to leader of a professional community with a focus on learning" (p. 15). Yet, while the current educational terrain has called for a new approach in school leadership, little empirical research existed exploring the AP's role beyond the realm of serving in a limited capacity to assist the principal within a school (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Celiken (2001) argued that this lack of emphasis on the instructional leadership development of an AP is little to non-existent due to the ambiguity

that prevails within the job role and the responsibilities required of an AP.

Conjointly, research conducted by Oliver (2005) suggested that the AP is vital to the success of a principal. Therefore, providing opportunities to increase the instructional leadership capacity for these leaders is crucial to improving the overall student achievement and performance in schools. Hausman et al. (2012) research suggested that before the 1980s, most empirical studies that discussed the role of the AP were generally broad in scope and only focused on the managerial aspects of this position. Contrastingly, Barnett et al. (2012) argued against implications associated with Hausman et al. (2002) work and insisted that the role of an AP change because the needs for schools have changed. These researchers maintained that a school's success centers on its leadership team members having a solid understanding and skill set around the instructional practices to increase overall achievement (Gurley et al., 2015).

Barnett et al. (2012) suggested that assistant principals lack adequate training to deal with curriculum and instruction support in schools, even though this should be a part of their daily responsibilities. According to these authors, time and conflict resolution usually supersede their instructional leadership responsibilities. The findings from this study directly link to the findings of Militello et al. (2015) that argued most often assistant principals are confined to only being exposed to work that is managerial in scope, and not provided opportunities to expand their range of responsibilities to other areas of school leadership.

Notwithstanding, Searby et al. (2017) concluded that the modern-day era for an AP must meet the instructional expectations that are required for principals to help transform the performance of a school community. However, in contrast, research by Barnett et al. (2012), Oleszewski et al. (2012), Hunt (2011), and Sun (2011) all confirmed that many APs while understanding the expectations, still feel underprepared to meet the demands for the changing

needs of a school due to their limited experience with instructional leadership. A commonality

acknowledged among these research studies discussed the APs expertise with general school

management and the exclusion from the other instructional areas that also support the overall

performance of a school. In addition, research has also proclaimed an influential factor of the

APs instructional leadership depends upon the principal's willingness and delegation of sharing

in this responsibility (Barnett et al., 2012; Celikten, 2001; Hunt, 2011; Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Brewer (2001) articulated that an instructional leader must encompass a variety of

abilities to promote a thriving school community. To provide more clarity, Brewer (2011, p.30)

outlined ten practices that instructional leaders must engage in to increase their leadership skills.

These practices include:

1. Focus on instruction

2. Building a community of learners (staff development)

3. Shared decision making

4. Sustain the basic

5. Leverage time

6. Support necessary professional development

7. Assess and redirect resources

8. Be a person of integrity

9. Remain competent

10. Develop a climate of inquiry and continuous improvement.

Cranston et al. (2004) posited that the changes within education support a new approach

to increase the instructional focus of leadership for both the principal and AP. Finkel (2012)

asserted that principals who possess sharp instructional leadership practices produce more

success in their role, particularly in under-performing school environments. To support this notion even further, Fink and Silverman (2014) posited that school conditions must exist that promote an appropriate atmosphere to address the support needed that improves instructional performance. A significant consideration these researchers connected to instructional leadership involved the reciprocal exchange of responsibility that exists between school leadership. By understanding the role and responsibilities of instructional leadership that the principal must meet, AP must align themselves with enhancing their work to include supporting the instructional needs of the ever-changing school community.

Role of the Principal

The examination of literature has shown a continuing interest in understanding the preparation process afforded to APs that prepares them for the principalship (Gutmore, 2015). Among existing research, it remains evident that the current role of the AP does not adequately prepare them for their next level of school leadership – the principalship (Gutmore, 2015; Kwan, 2009; Morgan, 2018; Oleszewski et al., 2012). According to Morgan (2018), the role of the AP is an insufficient pathway that provides the opportunity for this group of leaders to advance their knowledge base and preparedness for the complexities required for the role of a principal. Previous research by Kwan (2009) deduced that because of the lack of access to needed leadership areas in the role of the AP, many APs do not realize how under-equipped they are until assuming the role of a principal.

Goodson's (2000) evaluation of the APs role in preparation for becoming a principal inferred that the AP position is the training ground that deepens your leadership knowledge, understanding that your job is to assist and study the leadership of your principal. Researchers such as Davis et al., (2005), Oleszewski et al., (2012), and Viadero (2009), all recognized in their studies that the work of a school principal is crucial to the ultimate success achieved in schools. The

Wallace Foundation published an article that described the critical functions of a principal that

meets the demands for today's schools. This organization identified that effective principals

execute actions in their work that: "(a) mold the vision for academic achievement and success,

(b) create a positive climate conducive to teaching and learning, (c) cultivating leadership, and

(d) improve equitable classroom instructional practices" (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p.6).

The national organization, New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS), conducted a study

published by the Bush Institute. This study, led by researchers Ikemoto et al. (2014), focused on

the significant systems that principals must incorporate in their practice to lead successful

schools. One critical method that this research extracted from their work involved a principal's

cultivation of "collective responsibility" (p. 10). The incorporation of collective responsibility

and school leadership directly linked to findings associated with the works of Mulcahy (2019).

Implications tied to the work of effective principals, as argued by Mulcahy (2019), determined

that principals must ensure that their work has a focus on instructional leadership first, and

followed by excellent managerial management. This study's recommendations further asserted

the importance of APs receiving opportunities that engage them in the process of strengthening

their instructional leadership while working alongside their principals in schools.

Mentorship of the Assistant Principal

Mentoring is defined in the literature in a variety of different ways. Daresh and Playko

(1992) described mentorship as a relationship in which both the mentor and mentee gain value

from experience. In exploring the topic of mentoring, research exclaims in asserting that

mentoring for school leaders helps improve the performance outcomes for school leaders (Coelli

et al., 2012; Spiro et al., 2007; Warren & Kelson, 2012). A review of existing literature

supported the use of mentorship as a pathway to improving the leadership abilities of a principal.

Still, it negated to discuss the influence mentorship would have on an AP (Dimmock, 2012). According to Daresh (2004), mentorship is an "essential part of the socialization and professional formation of a school administrator" (p. 502). The strength of mentorship was later confirmed in research by Olsezewski et al. (2012) when these researchers asserted that developing a strong mentoring relationship with your principal enhances not only your professional growth but provides one with more leadership experiences.

Research also suggested that formalized mentoring programs reply on the teaching of pedagogical concepts to establish the fundamental basis for leadership theory, however, informal mentoring helps school leaders to make sense of theory and apply it within the scope and context of their work in schools (Hansford & Enrich, 2005; Pounder & Crow, 2005). Additionally, the value and importance of mentoring for principals has also received national attention. For example, the Wallace Foundation (2000) posited that a national call for mentoring for principals has drawn much attention due to the fear of a principal pipeline shortage (p. 6). This organization proclaimed that it is paramount for school districts across the country to establish a framework that helps to support the ever-changing needs of principals in schools today. Contrarily, research studies do not exist that explicitly discuss the value or contributions of mentorship and its implications towards developing the leadership of APs.

As the existing research continued to suggest that the role of the assistant principal is a challenging and complex role to understand, and an emphasis for developing their capacity continues to receive minimal attention in research (Armstrong, 2015). The training and development of assistant principals primarily results from this group of leaders taking graduate level coursework and achieving state certification, which enables them to become an assistant principal. Yet, the certification required to serve in this role does not fulfill all the requirements

needed to grow professionally. As a result, many assistant principals are general school support managers, and not school leaders in development for the role to become a principal (Cranston et al, 2004; & Barnett et al, 2012).

What is more concerning is that the research continues to speak about how principals play a pivotal role in the development of an assistant principal. However, research lacks substantial evidence suggesting how this development meets the complex needs of assistant principals. Specifically, relevant studies emphasized that the APs instructional leadership's advancement continues to be underutilized (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). However, the development and mentoring of assistant principals have traditionally been at the discretion of the principal. Calabrese and Tucker-Ladd (1991) argued that the principal should serve a mentor to the assistant principal. As Daresh (2004) suggested, whether formal or informal, the direct influence of mentoring an assistant principal comes from the interaction and relationship that they establish with the principal.

After a review of the literature on mentorship, it is quite clear that there are dissimilarities between the assistant principal and principal's role and the value placed on how these groups of leaders are developed in increasing their overall skillsets. Research has hypothesized that mentorship does have positive outcomes for school leaders. Still, much of the literature does not expound upon the impact of mentoring and its influence on developing an AP who desires to become a principal one day. The research also seemed to support the notion that mentoring is an ideal way to cultivate and build upon school leaders' skills. Still, minimal evidence currently exists about regarding the mentorship afforded APs who aspire to advance in their career role to become a principal.

Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

This section summarizes the framework of theories that guided the study. This research study utilized a conceptual framework that synthesizes components from Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT) and Uhl-Bien's and Graen's (1995) leader-member exchange theory (LMX) to undergird how this research topic will approach examining the lived experiences of how elementary assistant principals (AP) experience mentorship from their elementary principals.

Theory Overview

Concerning social learning theory (SLT), Bandura (1977) argued that to understand an individual's behavior, you must first recognize the interconnectedness that exists between the behavioral, cognitive, and environmental stimuli that exist within a particular context or setting. Furthermore, incorporating the leader-member exchange theory (LMX) will also support this study to help with understanding the dyadic relationship that exists between an elementary assistant principal and elementary principal. Uhl-Bien's and Graen's (1995) argued there is a unique dyadic relationship between a manager and subordinate. This relationship cultivates over time based on the role that each member plays in the evolvement of this relationship.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Throughout psychological research, Bandura (1977, 1986) has received notoriety as an influential contributor to social learning theory (SLT). SLT proposes that observation, retention, reproduction, and motivation are key elements that aid in the development of how an individual learns. The dissection of Bandura's theory and applying the aspects of observation, reproduction (modeling), and motivation will serve as useful components that help to undergird the conceptual framework that will guide this study. SLT further maintains that individuals learn new behaviors

through consistent reinforcement and modeling of behaviors. SLT's introduction into the field of psychology sought to bring about a deeper level of cognizance about how the behaviors of individuals derive from their experiences. If an individual is exposed to practices that promote positive outcomes, they are more likely to adopt or imitate those similar characteristics (Bandura, 1977, 1986).

The formation of this theory has an underpinning in both behavioral and cognitive learning. The premise of behavioral learning assumes that one's environment has a direct impact on how they behave. In the same way, cognitive learning also asserts that the psychological factors one is exposed can be a direct influence on how one behaves. Social learning and its theory incorporate psychological and environmental factors as the prime construct that influences how one behaves in a particular setting or under certain circumstances (Bandura, 1977, 1986).

Rotter's Social Learning Theory

Before Bandura's (1977, 1986) theory of Social Learning, an earlier theorist established some critical components of social learning that advanced the construct of Bandura's (1977, 1986) theory on social learning. To provide more specificity, Rotter (1954), a previous theorist of SLT, believed that to establish a solid understanding of social learning, one must incorporate how behaviorism reinforces conditions that provide an individual to learn new things. An essential perspective of Rotter's (1954) theory explored the role of expectancy and its impact on individuals' behavior.

Rotter's (1954) definition of *expectancy* has the same influence on others as both *imitation* and *reinforcement,* as suggested in Bandura's (1986) definition of SLT. Furthermore, integrating the aspects of *expectancy*, as an additional component of SLT, and

connecting its linkage to mentoring, can enrich the discussion about how the construct of a

mentor/mentee relationship evolves and how this relationship sustains between elementary

assistant principals and principals.

Additionally, Rotter's (1954) theory also maintained that expectancy plays a part in how

an individual attaches *value* to a task or experience. An underlying notion that Rotter (1954)

attributed to this experience has implications around an individual's motivation. However,

additional research connected the role of expectancy to social learning and how one's outlook can

directly influence certain behaviors in leaders. Issac et al. (2001) argued that leaders who exhibit

certain behaviors do so out of a sense of motivation that maximizes or minimizes the desired

outcome. These researchers found that the role of expectancy plays a part in how leaders are

intrinsically motivated. The motivation of an individual, in turn, drives certain behaviors.

To strengthen this perspective, Bhattacharya (2016) asserted that expectancy, if used as a

model of behavior, could significantly influence how others view their actions, goals, needs, and

experiences. Moreover, this correlation can again strengthen the conceptual understanding of

how principals engage elementary assistant principals in learning tasks and lessons that enhance

their leadership development. In addition, Black and Earnest (2009) suggested that when

elementary assistant principals receive ongoing opportunities to increase their skills and receive

ongoing coaching and development, their confidence grows, which builds the confidence to learn

additional skills. The results of this cycle can produce an increased desire to developing other

skills, bolstering this cycle, and providing a context for an elementary assistant principal to

develop the behaviors and leadership characteristics necessary for them to become a principal.

Black and Earnest (2009) produced research that examined the impact of measuring

outcomes of leadership development programs. A significant finding was that the process by

which one observes and then imitates a behavior is a pivotal component of social learning. Bandura (1986) acknowledged that through the observation of others, one would develop a deeper connection to the learning experience and provide an opportunity to reflect on their actions before performing them. In SLT, the modeling of behaviors assists the individual's learning, but much of this learning originates from the experiences that one receives from imitation and reinforcement (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

For this research study, examining aspects of an elementary assistant principals leadership development, the use of the term *imitation,* as described in SLT (Bandura, 1986)*,* can serve as a component to establish a basis for how principals inherently model leadership characteristics that elementary assistant principals observe daily. In a like manner, this researcher asserts that an aspect of *reinforcement,* as a component in SLT, can also be used to help establish a theoretical construct for the term of *mentoring* as it relates to the phenomena of how elementary assistant principals experience mentoring from their principals.

Leader Member Exchange Theory (LMX)

The quality of and opportunities for how school leaders are mentored is an evolving discussion within the field of educational leadership. Most of the existing research focuses solely on developing and cultivating the principal's skills, with little to no attention given to the role of an elementary assistant principal (Glanz, 1994; Stein, 2006). Authors Ramani and Kachur (2006) further explained that an individual's mentorship is vital to his or her success. In thinking about this and applying this notion to how elementary assistant principals receive mentoring from their principals, this researcher asserts that the use of Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) is also an appropriate theoretical construct to include in this research study.

LMX theory examines the role-taking, role-making, and the exchanges between leaders and subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This theory emerged throughout the research from the previous seminal works of Dansereau et. al (1975) and the work that these researchers conducted around the vertical dyad linkage. The earlier work leading to the LMX theory's evolution focused on the role of supervisor as being the dyad leader, and conversely, the subordinate as a dyad member. The premise of this dyadic relationship focused on the frequency and interactions that occur between the members in this group (supervisor and subordinate). Furthermore, the role of this dyadic relationship between a supervisor and subordinate sought to highlight how these interactions enhanced an organization's culture, mentorship, and the feedback that was provided to the subordinate by the supervisor (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The main theoretical foundation of the LMX theory describes the various types of relationships that evolve between leaders and subordinates (Naidoo et al., 2011). Applying this theory will help to advance the discussion about the implications of relationship building, and how the dyadic relationship between a principal and elementary assistant principal reinforces aspects about the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals. House and Aditya (1997) asserted that a high degree of reciprocal influence and commitment between leaders and followers resulted in *positive* outcomes in the subordinates (follower) performance, behavior, and commitment. The result of these researcher's in some ways applies to the construct of mentoring in terms of elementary assistant principal performance, practice, and engagement because of the mentor/mentee relationship between a principal and elementary assistant principal.

Figure 1 (below) represents the conceptual framework that will be used as a guiding lens in this study by showing the repetitive cycle of how elementary assistant principals increase their

leadership growth and development. This growth leads to improving the leadership competencies in an elementary assistant principal, which in turn increases their readiness to become a principal. Lastly, this graphic also represents a basic constructivist conceptual framework and delineates the main themes of this study.

Figure 1

Graphical Representation of Conceptual Framework
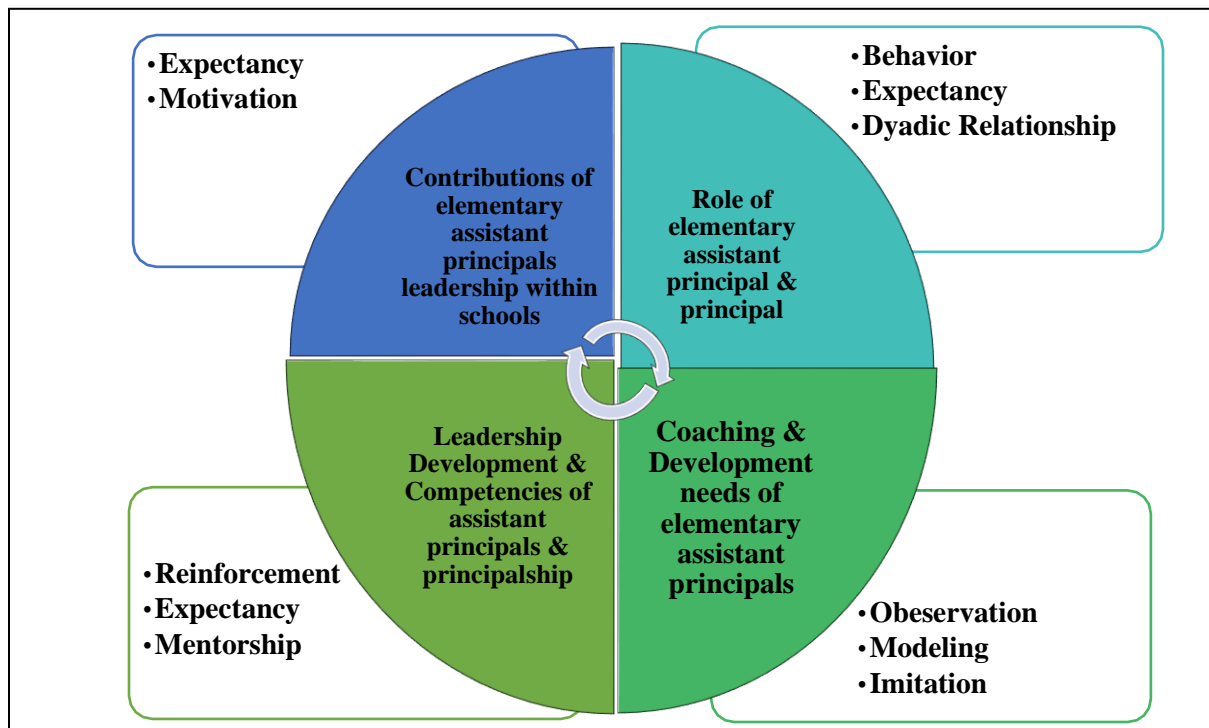
Conclusion

Evidence from a thorough review of the research certainly justifies the need to explore the leadership and development of the AP within schools. While this role lacks the ultimate power and prestige of the principalship, it is certainly a position that aligns, in many ways, with many of the core responsibilities inclusive of the job responsibilities and expectations required for the role of a principal in a school. Notwithstanding, the abundance of research that assuredly discussed that the role of the assistant principal is one faced with many uncertainties and complexities, research

continued to neglect exploring the full extent of leadership or leadership propensity for this school leader. Focus and evidence of how this unique school leader role, within schools, continues to remain limited. The literature presented demonstrates the need for analysis of how assistant principals experience and perceive mentorship and how their experiences and conceptions of mentorship transfer over to their leadership preparedness to become a principal.

It is clear from the research that the job of an assistant principal lacks clarity and a defined expectation for the perplexity of this role. While complicated, the assistant principal's role is undoubtedly a core component and, to some degree, the backbone to a school. Although this role is seemingly unpopular within research and often referred to as the "abstruse" and "neglected" leader, there remains a call to explore how to further develop and cultivate this school leader for the role to become a principal (Glanz, 1994, Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012).

In conclusion, this chapter reviewed the relevant research related to the assistant principal. The chapter begins with a description of the assistant principal's historical background and the evolution of this school leader's role. Subsequently, this chapter then discussed the role and responsibilities of the assistant principal, assistant principal leadership and professional development, principal preparation, and concluded with a discussion regarding the mentorship and leadership development of the assistant principal. In the following chapter, the methodology used in this study will described in greater detail.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenographical study was to explore the experiences and conceptions that elementary assistant principals have about the mentorship they receive from their elementary principals. More specifically, this study used a phenomenographic approach to explore the lived experiences of a group of elementary assistant principals and principals to investigate and analyze the different ways in which these individuals conceptualize the experiences of mentoring. Furthermore, this qualitative study examined if there are similarities or differences in the emerging perceptions that elementary assistant principals and elementary principals have about the ways in which mentorship influences the leadership development of an elementary assistant principal for the role of becoming a principal. This chapter includes the research design, research tradition, research questions, study's goals, context, participant's, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, researcher positionality, researcher worldview, strategies to ensure trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the chapter summary.

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenographical study aimed to identify the different ways elementary assistant principals and elementary principals experience the phenomenon of mentorship. Lancy (1993) posited that the emergence of qualitative research grew out of a desire to record and understand the impact of the human experience. Qualitative research, as defined by Stake (2010), encompasses research that primarily "relies on human perception and

understanding" (p. 11). Merriam (2009) contended the essence of qualitative research involves how people develop meanings from their experiences that ultimately lead to the construction of how they see the world around them. The purpose of this study is to examine how individuals create and develop meaning from their lived experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Newman and Benz (1998) asserted that qualitative research seeks to explore the phenomenon under study in an intimate way. Creswell (2014) defined quantitative research as a method primarily interested in investigating the "relationship between and among a set of variables" (p. 155). The inquiry of study in quantitative research involves examining the variables and the relationship that lies between them using a statistical analysis method to report findings. To examine this research topic more closely, the use of a qualitative methodology helps answer this research study's question. Additionally, positioning this study through the lens of a qualitative inquiry was desired because the nature and scope of this topic will be descriptive, and an emphasis placed on examining the words, experiences, and the feelings that the participants attached to the phenomenon explored (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 2010).

Yin (2011) also expounded on qualitative research as a method that enables a researcher to "(a) Study the meaning of people's lives, (b) Express the views and perspectives of a group of people, (c) Examine the contextual conditions within which people live, and (d) Strive to use various sources of evidence rather than trusting only one source of evidence" (p.7). Yilmaz (2013) further described the use of qualitative research as an "emergent, inductive, and interpretative" approach to better understanding how people affix meanings to the experiences they encounter from their life experiences (p. 312). The nature of this research study was to explore the multiple realities elementary assistant principals develop from the phenomenon of mentorship as a result using a qualitative inquiry to explore this topic is appropriate. Moreover,

utilizing a phenomenographical approach to explore this topic was also applicable because the essence of exploration involves understanding the different realities that elementary assistant principals and principals have about mentorship (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Major & Savin-Baden, 2013).

Research Tradition

Phenomenography

The research tradition for this study used the qualitative approach of phenomenography. Phenomeno*graphy* offers a distinctive research approach in that the essence of exploration focuses on the variations one gives to the descriptions and conceptualizations they have experienced with the phenomenon under study (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997; Giorgi, 1999; Richardson, 1999). Sherman and Webb (1988) and Trigwell (2006) asserted that qualitative researchers who use a phenomenographic approach seek to discover how an individual processes the *content* of a particular phenomenon to capture and sort the experience into conceptual categories and descriptions that directly relate to the individualized perceptions participants draw from the phenomenon under investigation.

Phenomenography originated from the seminal works on teaching and learning by Ferrence Marton and his colleagues in the Department of Education during the 1970s in Gothenburg, Sweden (Marton 1981). Phenomenography, as described by Martin and Booth (1997), is a way of experiencing a thing, and the object of the research is the multiple ways of experiencing a phenomenon. According to Richardson (1999), the essence of Marton's framework of phenomenography is that "learning assumes central importance because it represents a qualitative change from one conception concerning some particular aspect of reality to another" (p. 53). Likewise, using a phenomenographic approach provided the outcome space

for the researcher to organize and place the participants' experiences into categories and descriptions (Forster, 2016; Trigwell, 2006). As well, another distinctive feature of phenomenography is its focus on understanding the similar or different experiences of a group of individuals from a non-dualistic context (Berglund et al., 2009; Bowden & Walsh, 1994).

Phenomenography also allows the researcher to provide an explicit description of an individual's experiences from the second-order perspective (Limberg, 2000). Using the second-order perspective, in a phenomenographic study, allows the participants to give significance to the experience of the phenomenon directly from their perspective and point of view. Giorgi (1999) posited that a critical overview of phenomenography is its ability to interpret the structure and meaning that one gives to a particular phenomenon, based on their direct experience. In contrast, using the first-order perspective emphasizes the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon from their point of view. Assarroudi and Heydari (2016) and Marton (1981) also describes the first-order perspective as an exploration of the *why* of a particular phenomenon. Brew and Lucas (2009) further expounded on Marton's (1981) first-order perspective as a researcher establishing a "what is the case" of the phenomenon under study (p. 109). Researchers Assarroudi and Heydari (2016) established that Marton's (1981) explanation about the use of the first-order perspective essentially answers the question "what a thing is" in terms of analyzing a phenomenon.

Conversely, the use of the second-order perspective allows the researcher to describe the experiences and variations in conceptions directly from the lens of the individual who experienced the phenomenon (participant) rather than interpreting the experience from the perspective of the researcher (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013; Larsson and Holmstrom, 2007). Rands and Gansemer-Topf (2016) also concurred that using phenomenography, as a research

approach, is suited for a researcher whose primary interest lies with understanding the varying perspectives an individual holds about a phenomenon. Similarly, Akerlind (2012) suggested that using phenomenography, as a research tradition, allows the direct exploration of how an individual experiences a phenomenon versus focusing on the phenomenon itself.

Ornek (2008) also stressed the personal focus that phenomenography has with the connections individuals make to the phenomenon versus the phenomenon itself. Jonhston et al. (2016) interestingly identified that phenomenography helps the researcher examine *how* versus *what* of the phenomenon under study. Sherman and Webb (1988) contended that qualitative researchers who use a phenomenographic approach seek to discover how an individual processes the "*content* of a particular phenomenon in order to capture and sort the experience into conceptual categories that directly relate to the individualized perceptions participants draw from the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 144).

Given the paucity of this research topic, this study investigated how individuals develop a personalized meaning of mentorship. Phenomenography was the most appropriate research approach given the goal was to examine the different ways elementary assistant principals and elementary principals experienced the phenomena. Hence, this phenomenographic study detailed the divergences in the participants' experiences and conceptions of mentorship and its influence on developing the leadership skills for elementary assistant principals (Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton, 1981).

Research Question

This phenomenographic study focused on the following research question:

1.   What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principals' experience mentoring from their elementary principals?

Study Goals

The perceptions, beliefs, and experiences that both elementary assistant principals and elementary principals conceptualized about mentoring were examined. The aim was to form a deeper understanding of how mentorship helps to improve and fortify the talents, skills, and competencies of elementary assistant principals who desire to become a principal eventually. As an elementary assistant principal, the researcher has experienced working under different principals, all of whom possessed a different leadership style and each of them approached mentorship from a different perspective in how they approached leadership development. Irrevocably, the intent was to investigate the perspectives that both elementary assistant principals and elementary principals ascribe to mentorship and how this belief influences the relationship established between them.

Intellectually, there is an interest in contributing to the field of educational leadership by exploring a group of school leaders often referred to as the "forgotten man" within schools (Glanz, 1994, p. 283). Moreover, to highlight the experiences of other elementary assistant principals and allow them to express and give meaning to their experiences of mentorship and the ways that it has shaped their ability to assume a principal role was also a goal of the research. Conducting a study that accentuates the needs and leadership development of the assistant principal will contribute to research by addressing an existing research gap for this group of school leaders.

Lastly, on a practical level, the intent is to share the recommendations and implications of this study with the broader research community through the publication of this dissertation. Additionally, the district used in this study will receive a copy of this dissertation. It is hoped that

the findings of this study can aide this district in evaluating some of the practices and policies currently used when developing professional opportunities targeted for assistant principals and principals alike. The intent is also to use this qualitative phenomenographical dissertation study to continue researching and contributing to the empirical literature about some of the best practices for cultivating both the role and leadership experiences assistant principals receive that would adequately prepare this group of leaders for becoming a principal.

Context

Creswell (2014) contended that it is vital to ensure the selection of the research site is purposeful when conducting qualitative research. Comparatively, Miles and Huberman (1994) listed a set of criteria a researcher should use when selecting a research site. These researchers suggested that site selection for a qualitative study should include: "(a) identifying the participants or who/what will serve as the focus for your study, (b) site selection where your study will take place, (c) identifying what the participants will be doing, and (d) understanding the process of evolving events of the participants" (p. 47).

This research study took place in one school district, located in the Southeast region of the United States. This site was used because of accessibility and access to participants by the researcher. The city where the school district is located ranks as one of the top 40 metropolitan cities in the United States and is one of the top 10 largest cities in the southeast region. This school system has an active enrollment of around 40,000 students attending 98 learning sites, including two-single-gender campuses and 17 charter schools. This school district has experienced increased achievement in student growth and performance over the past six years. According to statistical data collected by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA,

2020), this school district has a student enrollment of more than 40,000 for grades K-12. The

demographics of this district are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

School District Demographic Information

Characteristic	% of Student Enrollment
Race/Ethnicity:	
Black/African American	75%
White/Caucasian	15%
Latino/Hispanic	7%
American Indian, Asian, or Multi-Racial	2%
Exceptionality:	
Students with Disabilities (SWD)	22.3%
English Language Learners (ESOL)	2.9%
Limited English Proficient	5%
Early Intervention Program K-5 (EIP)	27.4%
Remedial Education Program 6-12 (REP)	16%
National School Lunch Recipient	77%

In a qualitative phenomenographical study, the researcher seeks to understand the varying

ways or conceptions in which the participants understand and draw meaning from the

phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009; Sin, 2010; Stake, 2010). Larsson and

Holmstrom (2007) stressed that the fundamental role of the qualitative researcher is to collect

participant data, analyze the data, establish themes of meaning from the analysis, and connect the findings to the unique ways in which each participant experienced the phenomenon from the second-order perspective (Giorgi, 1999; Limberg, 2000; Rands and Gansemer-Topf, 2016). More specifically, both Ornek (2008) and Johnston et al. (2016) surmised that a distinctive feature of a phenomenographical research study is the researcher's way of emphasizing how each participant's lived experiences impacts the phenomenon being explored. The analysis of the data from this study involved applying principles of best practices in phenomenographical analysis derived from the works of researchers such as Sin (2010), Sjostrom and Dahlgren (2002, p.341), and Gonzalez (2010, p.65). More indicatively, the following seven steps were used in analyzing the participant data for this study:

(1) Reading the participant interviews several times so to become familiar with participant responses.

(2) Reading transcripts, a second time to infer similarities and differences from the participant's responses.

(3) Identifying codes from participant responses and categorizing identifying them into categories.

(4) Classifying the categories and them narrowing them into preliminary groups to develop emerging themes.

(5) Re-review the preliminary groups to identify if the participant responses represent an accurate experience of the participants.

(6) Examine the data to determine the relationships that exist and the different ways each participant experienced the phenomenon – outcome space.

(7) Begin to contrast the categories based on participant response and findings.

Stake (2010) epitomized qualitative research as an "interpretative, experience-based, situational, and personalistic" approach to investigating the emergence one has with a particular phenomenon (p. 31).

Study Participants

The participants in this study were current elementary level school administrators within a large school district. Originally, the targeted number of participants for this study included 10-15 individuals utilizing criterion purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). The results of this phenomenographical study were from five elementary-level assistant principals and three elementary level principals as shown in Table 3. This number was less than the proposed number of research participants. This was in part precipitated by the initial number of participants who expressed their willingness to take part in this study and the saturation of information received from the participants. As discussed by Creswell (2013), a saturation of information transpires when your research sample size does not add new insight to the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, Creswell (2014) stated that it is "equally viable" to extract meaningful data from a smaller sample size in qualitative research (p. 189). In this phenomenographical study, after the eighth participant interview, the findings of the research question had been established as no new information was being introduced.

Table 3

Participant Profiles (n=8)

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Yrs of AP Experience	Yrs of Principal Experience	Yrs working with Principal	Yrs working with Asst. Principal	Degree Level

AP Roger	M	AA	25-34 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Specialist
AP Lauren	F	AA	35-44 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Specialist
AP Naomi	F	AA	25-34 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Masters
AP Charlie	M	AA	45-54 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Specialist
AP Rylee	F	AA	35-44 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Doctorate
Principal Obama	M	AA	45-54 Years old	1-3 years	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	Specialist
Principal Margo	F	AA	55+ Years old	N/A	10-15 years	N/A	10-15 years	Doctorate
Principal Luck	M	AA	35-44 Years old	4-9 years	4-9 years	N/A	1-3 years	Doctorate

There was a total range of educational leadership experience spanning from 1-15 years between all eight participants. Specifically, participants with 1-9 years of school leadership experience represented 87.5% of the sample. The participants with 10+ years of experience represented 12.5% of the sample. All participants provided their racial background. One hundred

percent of the participants identified as being African American. Four participants, or 50%, were female, and 50% or 4 participants were male. All eight of the research participants self-reported their highest level of education. One participant, or 12.5%, reported that he/she has an earned master's degree. Fifty percent or four participants reported they had a Specialist of Education degree. Three or 37.5% of participants reported having earned a doctoral (terminal) degree. The age of all participants fits between the pre-identified age group of 18-55 years of age.

The researcher utilized criterion purposive sampling to solicit research participants for this study. Patton (2002) described purposeful sampling as appropriate in qualitative research when participants are knowledgeable about or have encountered the phenomenon in question. The researcher incorporated participant-sampling strategies that included clear objectives that aligned directly with the goals for this study (Palys, 2008). Bernard (2002) emphasized that purposeful sampling is a useful method for participant selection when an individual is willing to participate and can communicate their experiences expressively and reflectively. For the context of this study, the participants selected were current elementary assistant principals and elementary principals. This study included interviewing five elementary assistant principals and three elementary principals. The participants were selected through criterion purposive sampling to establish variations in the participants' experiences to the phenomenon analyzed in this study (Palys, 2008; Trigwell, 2000).

Additionally, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from both Kennesaw State University and the school district was obtained prior to conducting the research for this study. Once research approval was obtained, the steps began to identify viable participants for this study within the selected school district. The research study participants self-identified

themselves as wanting to participate in this study after an email solicitation (see Appendix) went out to all elementary assistant principals and elementary principals within this large school district. Participants who identified as willing to take part in this study completed an initial screening to ensure they met the participant selection criterion. Due to the participant's direct experience of currently serving as an elementary level assistant principal or principal, each individual was able to provide ample and sufficient descriptions of his/her lived experiences of the phenomenon being investigated.

The criterion for participant selection included obtaining participant demographic information and meeting the inclusion criteria for participation. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for elementary assistant principals and elementary principals are listed outlined below. Inclusion criteria:

- Elementary assistant principals who have an aspiration to become a principal eventually.

- Elementary principals who have expressed their desire to build the capacity of their elementary assistant principal.

Exclusion criteria:

- Elementary assistant principals who have expressed no desire to become a principal eventually.

- Elementary principal and elementary assistant principal teams who express no desire to participate in this research study.

Once the email was sent to eligible participants, the elementary assistant principals and elementary principals willing to participate responded to the researcher to schedule a date and

time to conduct a virtual interview. Participants selected a date and time at their convenience to interview with the researcher. A confirmation email was sent to all participants including the date and time of their selected interview date. The researcher scheduled interviews with the participants at their convenience to discuss the consent forms, explain the purpose of this study, and verbally obtain the participant's willingness to participate in the research study. All participant interviews were conducted online via the Zoom platform.

Data Collection

The objective of completing a phenomenographic study is to understand the experiences between the participants and the phenomenon explored (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013). The participants must also share the experience of the same phenomenon examined (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013; Creswell, 2014). Not only is it critical that participants connect directly to the phenomenon explored, but the researcher must also employ a "strategic sampling technique that will establish a basis for participants to share the various ways they have all experienced the phenomenon from their viewpoint" (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013, p. 5).

According to Collier-Reed and Ingerman (2013), the primary method of data collection consists of using "interviews or written text in response to a specific question" (p. 4). For this study, semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method employed. The use of interviewing as a data collection provided this researcher with multiple opportunities to explore the perceptions of the participants to determine the variations in the experiences that participants hold of the phenomenon during the data analysis review. The generation of interview questions were open-ended and focused on the research question of the mentoring experiences that elementary assistant principals have received from their elementary principals.

To ensure the confidentiality of each participant, a pseudonym was given to each participant. Participants had the option to self-select their pseudonym or receive a randomly assigned pseudonym. The elementary assistant principals were given the pseudonyms AP Roger, AP Lauren, AP Naomi, AP Charles, and AP Rylee. Additionally, the elementary principals were given the pseudonyms Principal Obama, Principal Margo, and Principal Luck. Participant profiles were established by asking participants demographic questions about their roles, years of administrative experience, years working together with their respective elementary assistant principal or elementary principal and educational attainment.

Phenomenography was the research approach applied to this study. Phenomenography is a prominent methodological approach used when a researcher seeks to examine and explore how individuals experience a variance of perceptions from one particular phenomenon under study (Akerlind, 2012; Marton, 1981; Trigwell, 2006). Researchers such as Trigwell (2006) and Richardson (1999) summed up the essence of conducting phenomenological research in a divergent way. The researcher investigates how individuals uniquely process a phenomenon's content and extract meaning based on their personal lived experience. This study used three types of primary data sources: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) researcher notes, and (3) a review of district leadership documents. The rationalization for using these data sources was to elicit the lived experiences and conceptual understandings of how elementary assistant principals experienced mentoring by their elementary principals. According to Vagle (2016), the incorporation of multiple data sources helps the researcher to identify better the conceptual understanding of the investigated phenomenon from each of the research participants.

Data Collection Process

The data collection began with all research participants completing and emailing the researcher their completed informed consent form agreeing to participate in this research study (see Appendix A). Once the electronically signed acknowledgment of consent was received, the participants were then contacted to schedule a date and time to participate in a virtual Zoom interview. Each participant was provided with a brief demographic survey to collect baseline demographic information (see Appendix B). The researcher conducted semi-structured virtual (Zoom) interviews with each of the participants. The interviews were structured to allow each participant to discuss his/her lived experience and perceptions about the mentoring experiences they received from their elementary principals. In alignment with the best practices for qualitative research, reflexivity was incorporated during participant interviews by capturing journal notes when interacting with each participant. According to Cunliffe (2003), the use of reflexivity allows the researcher to 'go further than questioning the truth claims of others, to questioning how we as researchers construct meaning' (p. 985). Moreover, researchers Pessoa et al. (2019) concurred that reflexivity allows participants to suggest changes, disagree about the interpretation, add supplemental information, or clarify any esoteric points that emerged between the interviewer and interviewee.

Interviews

According to Patton (2002), qualitative researchers engage in the interview process to find information that is not readily accessible to them through general observation. Moreover, Merriam (2009) stated, "the main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information that is only in the mind of the individual" (p. 88). Inasmuch, Patton (2002) further

elaborated about interviewing in qualitative research as the opportunity for a researcher to obtain in-depth details from the participants. He stated:

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe…We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (p. 340-341)

The participant interviews took place during from October 1, 2020 through October 25, 2020. This study used digital interviewing via the Zoom platform to explore the research questions used in this study. Implementing an online approach to seeking the research participants' engagement helped ensure that all participants receive the appropriate safety measures amid the current worldwide coronavirus pandemic. According to Seymour (2001), the use of online or digital technology has now become a frequently used method for collecting data within the realm of qualitative research. Equally, Glassmeyer and Dibbs (2012) posited that using electronic platforms in qualitative research allows participants to "express their feelings freely in verbal and non-verbal ways" (p. 293). Table 3 outlines current qualitative research that established a justification for the use of online interviewing as a qualitative inquiry tool.

Table 4

Online Interviewing Methodology

Research Author	Qualitative Research Study Supporting Online Methodology
Hinchcliffe & Gavin (2009)	Social and Virtual Networks: Evaluating Synchronous Online Interviewing Using Instant Messenger
Irvine (2011)	Duration, Dominance and Depth in Telephone and Face-to-Face Interviews: A Comparative Exploration
Bampton et. al (2013)	The e-interview in qualitative research. In Advancing research methods with new technologies
Janghorban et. al (2014)	Skype interviewing: the new generation of online synchronous interview in qualitative research
Barratt et. al (2016)	Active engagement with stigmatized communities through digital ethnography

As a primary step during the interview process, the researcher reminded participants of the purpose of the study, research procedures, anticipated benefits, participant rights, and the protection of human rights and confidentiality. To establish a rapport with the respondents, the researcher identified himself as a doctoral student at Kennesaw State University and as an elementary assistant principal within the district under study. Further, the researcher obtained participant approval to record the audio portion of our interview to ensure that all discussion of the interview is obtained for transcription. The participant interviews were audio-recorded individually using the Zoom. As an additional safeguarding measure, the audio recordings were used to ensure that they matched the transcription for accuracy. All audio records were downloaded to a personal external drive and then locked in a file cabinet. Further, the transcripts were also printed and locked in a secure file cabinet; participants were also given the option to review transcripts for accuracy. All research participants opted not to review any or make any

corrections to the transcripts. Finally, a journal with all participant notes was also locked and secured in a file cabinet when the researcher was not engaged in data analysis.

A semi-structured open-ended interview protocol was used for the individual interviews (see Appendix B) to extract the experiences, conceptions, and perceptions that both elementary assistant principals and elementary principals have regarding the phenomenon of mentorship. According to Bowden (2000), using open-ended questions allows the researcher to capture the essence of the phenomenon explored in a phenomenographic study. Similarly, Trigwell (2006) posited that a researcher should interview in a format that provides a space and opportunity for follow-up questions to be asked, as applicable. The use of follow-up questions allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the investigated phenomenon.

Observations

Observations in qualitative research assist the researcher with observing specific behaviors from participants that can be seen directly and answer the question of who, what, when, where, and why of the perceived individuals and phenomena related to the research question (Stake, 2010). Yin (2011) also suggested that a researcher pays attention to an individual's social gestures, actions, and social interactions during the observation process. For this study, strategies suggested by Creswell (2013) were integrated. Creswell recommended a researcher keep a chronological log of the research events, which is descriptive and allows the researcher to engage in self-reflection of the data collected from the participants. Specifically, observation of participants included observing participant conversations and dialogue during the interviewing process focusing and noting any specific observables in the participant's behavior

while also notating down thick descriptions of what was observed after asking a research question.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2014), the process of data analysis in qualitative research consists of the researcher, "making sense out of the data collected" (p. 195). This process encompasses the researcher organizing and preparing for the data analysis, reading, and reviewing all data, reducing the data into themes through coding, and finally begin the process of coding data (Creswell, 2014 p. 197). The data collection for this study included interviews that are audio-recorded, transcribed in their entirety, and converted to text-based documents using Rev.com, a trustworthy and confidential transcription service. ATLAS.ti Version 9 (Berlin Software Development, 2013) was used to organize and analyze the collected data. Atlas.ti Version 9 is a qualitative research software package designed for qualitative researchers to code their research studies.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) contended that there is no one precise way a researcher can analyze and interpret the results of their data findings. Similarly, Creswell (2014) and Hycener (1999) posited that data analysis is a unique process whereby the researcher breaks down the data into segmented parts without losing the context of the phenomenon under study. The data analysis for this research study included incorporating aspects and strategies discussed by Creswell (2014), which were adapted after Moustakas's previous work (1994). This research study included the following: (1) utilizing tables and graphs to illuminate data analysis; (2) using quotations to support analysis findings; (3) providing an in-depth discussion to the research question; and (4) illustrating the significance of the research findings from the participants of this

study (Collier-Reed and Ingerman, 2013; Creswell, 2014). Additionally, data collection, including all interviews, field- notes, and any district documents (as applicable), were included for data analysis and reduction.

Lastly, the researcher used open coding to develop themes and identify categories and concepts from the research participants. Also used was an anticipated data reduction matrix to further help with the organization of any additional research details that emerged from this research. Accordingly, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested including an anticipated data reduction matrix helps the researcher highlight aspects of data pertinent to your research topic. Using this strategy also highlighted data points that do not align with your research focus. Figure 2 (below) provides a graphical representation of how this was used to engage in the data collection process for this research topic.

Figure 2

Graphical representation of the data collection process for this study
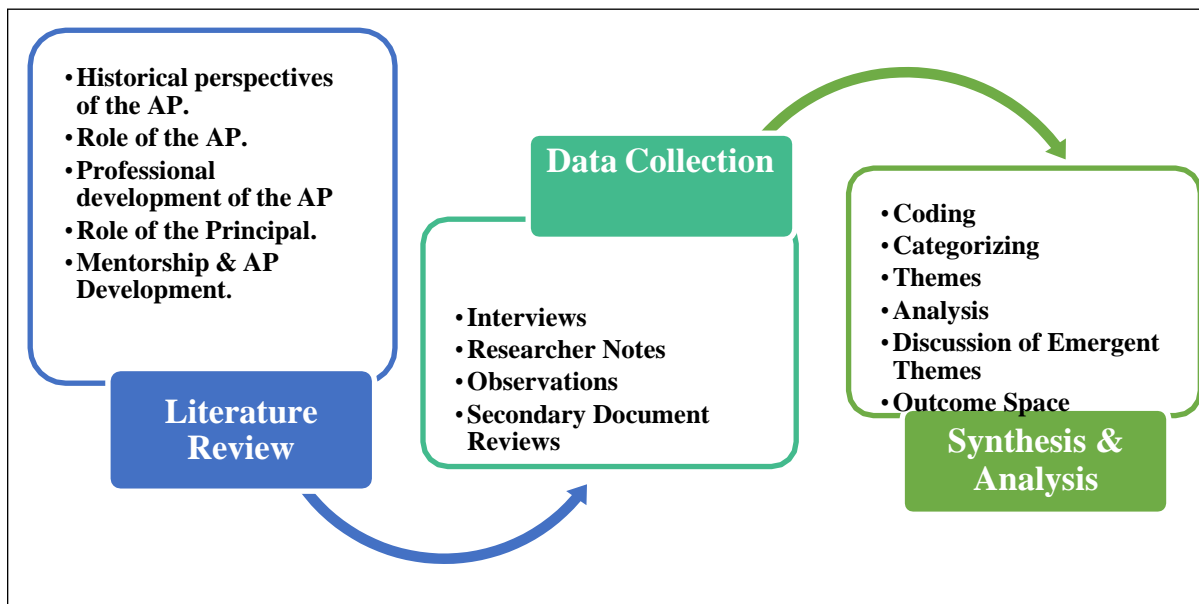
Collier-Reed and Ingerman (2013) suggested that researchers who complete a phenomenographic study understand the significance of the conceptions that emerge from their research findings because of the variance in the qualitatively different (second-order perspective) ways participants experience the phenomenon under investigation. These researchers further suggested that the difference in the participants' conceptions is the crux of what helps the researcher develop the major themes and descriptions that emerge from the study's findings (Collier-Reed & Ingram, 2013; Marton, 1994). Further, Akerlind (2005) asserted that phenomenographic studies require the researcher to absolve any preconceived assumptions to fully understand and capture the collective experiences of the participants during the data analysis stage.

During the data analysis process, different conceptualizations that participants' attach to the phenomena explored were identified. Recognizing the differences in conceptions helped to establish the basis for understanding the qualitatively different viewpoints of the participants' experiences in the outcome space (Collier-Reed & Ingram, 2013). Akerlind (2005) suggested that establishing descriptive categories emerging from the participant's conceptualizations is the critical process a qualitative researcher uses to inform the discussion about the structure of how the particular phenomenon influences one's experience and understanding about the phenomenon in the "outcome space" (Akerlind, 2005, p. 323). In phenomenographic research, the outcome space provides the researcher with an opportunity to examine the phenomenon from the integrated perspectives in how each participant experiences and makes meaning of the phenomenon under study (Akerlind, 2005). More specifically, the outcome space, during data analysis, involved analyzing the responses of each participant in a logical manner to establish a

set of commonalities of differences in the perceptions and experiences each individual has about

the phenomenon investigated (Marton, 1981).

A seven-step data analysis process was conducted, adopting suggestions from Sjostrom

and Dalhgren (2002, p.341) and Gonzalez (2010). First, steps one and two of the Gonzalez

(2010) data analysis approach included the open coding phase of data analysis used for this

study. Stages three and four are an equivalent step to axial coding, as described by Allen (2017),

followed by selective coding completed during step five. Step six included an analysis step

specific to phenomenography. This final phase involved reviewing and analyzing: (a) the

different ways this phenomenon is experienced in the represented cohort of participants, and (b)

this researcher's interpretation of how those experiences were derived. Finally, during step seven,

the researcher reviewed the data and identified any differences based on the participants'

responses. Table 5 describes the specific steps that were used to analyze the data for this study.

Table 5

Phenomenographic Data Analysis Process

Process	Description
Step 1. Familiarization	The transcripts were read several times in order to become familiar with their contents. This step involved correcting any mistakes within the transcript.
Step 2. Compilation	The second step required a more focused reading in order to deduce similarities and differences from the transcripts. The primary aim of this step was to review the participants' answers to the interview questions that were asked during interviews. Through this process, the researcher identified the most valued elements in answers.

Table 5 Continued

Step 3. Condensation	This process involved selecting extracts that seem to be relevant and meaningful for this study. The main aim of this step was to sift through, omit the irrelevant, redundant, or unnecessary components within the transcript, and consequently decipher the central elements of the participants' responses.
Step 4. Preliminary grouping	This step focused on locating and classifying similar answers into the preliminary groups. This preliminary group was reviewed again to check whether any other groups showed the same meaning under different headings. Thus, the analysis presented an initial list of categories of descriptions.
Step 5. Preliminary comparison of categories	This step involved revising the initial list of categories to bring forth a comparison among the preliminary listed categories. The main aim of this step was to set up boundaries among the categories. Before going through to the next step, the transcripts were read again to check whether the preliminary established categories represented the accurate experience of the participants.
Step 6. Outcome space	Outcome space: in this step, the researcher hoped to discover the outcome space based the qualitatively different ways of understanding the participants related to the phenomena. The phenomenographic outcome space described the different ways, in which a phenomenon is experienced by a group of individuals. It also describes the different ways, in which the researcher has interpreted how a phenomenon is experienced in a cohort.
Step 7. Contrasting	The categories were contrasted based on participant responses and findings.

Note: Data Analysis Steps adopted after Sjostrom & Dalhgren (2002, p.341) & Gonzalez (2010)

Researcher's Vignette

I can vividly remember when I received the email that I had waited for weeks to receive. I was nervous and excited to open this email, but I decided to push past my anxiety because I needed to know if the answer was yes or no. When I opened the email, the subject line read, "Congratulations," we are pleased to inform you that you will join our next leadership cohort." I was overwhelmed with pure excitement because I wanted so desperately to become a school leader (principal) and learn how principals changed the dynamics of a school's performance to improve the learning experiences for all students.

My journey into the world of school leadership had officially begun. My acceptance into this program meant that I have what it takes to become a principal. After receiving my acceptance email, I soon learned about my school site placement, where I would work under a principal as his/her assistant principal. This experience's goal was for me to learn under a principal who would teach me all I needed to know about leading a school and prepare me for a principal's role.

I quickly scheduled a meeting with my new principal to meet, become acquainted, and discuss how my leadership would look within the school. During our meeting, my new principal informed me that my leadership training would involve being responsible for student discipline, master scheduling, testing, and organizing the arrival/dismissal for students. As a new leader, I eagerly embraced these responsibilities because, after all, I am in training for the role of becoming a principal. My principal had many years of experience, respected in the district, and knew what I needed to learn so that I could become a principal.

When the year ended, I began applying for my first principalship. I interviewed for three school openings that I felt, at the time, would be an excellent match for me. With each interview, I asserted myself with a sense of confidence to talk about all of the tasks I completed during my residency experience. I was confident that this experience was all I needed to become a principal. Each interview resulted in me receiving a denial of the job. The feedback that I continued to hear was that I needed more leadership development and experience. I thought to myself, what more do I need to learn to become a principal. After all, I just finished an entire year working directly under a mentor principal who was preparing me for a principal's role.

You often hear that an assistant principal's position is the precursor step to the principal's role. Yet, while this is seemingly the natural succession for assistant principals, is this the assistant principal's actual reality? I have so many unanswered questions. What is the missing piece to this puzzle for mastering this leadership role called the assistant principal? How does the mentorship of a principal prepare an assistant principal for his/her next leadership role - the principalship!

Researcher Positionality

The following describes the researcher's positionality to himself, to others, to himself and society.

Self

I am a 41-year-old African American male who grew up in the Southeast region of the United States. I am the product of parents who come from two very distinct backgrounds. On my maternal family side, I am a third-generation college graduate. My mother's family placed a high value on education and, in turn, taught me the importance and value that school can give me to

achieve success in life. Unlike the beliefs of the maternal side of my family, the paternal side of my family did not value formal education as a critical factor for attaining a life of success.

Conversely, my father's family believed that attending college was an option only for privileged people, and the thought of pursuing a college education is not an option for an individual who came from a poor background. This side of my family further believed that you should obtain a job after you complete high school and hope that you can sustain that employment until you are ready to retire. Realizing that there were clear distinctions in the backgrounds and the core beliefs about education from my parents, I realized that I would have to decide how I viewed learning and the implications that it would have on my life. Understanding this, I decided that I wanted to pursue a career option that would work to dispel the myths that education is an option for some and not all. I saw the contrasting experiences between my parents, and I wanted to one day be in a position where I could positively influence the experience of others to feel empowered about making informed decisions about their futures.

Self to Others

As a researcher, I bring 13 years of experience to education, having worked a variety of school districts across the Southeast region of the United States. I also experience working with multiple school leaders (principals) where the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of an assistant principal varied. Additionally, I am currently an assistant principal working in the school district under investigation. It is also essential to discuss that I have served as a mentor to assistant principals newly appointed to their role within this district and have established relationships with other assistant principals and principals through my attendance during districtwide leadership meetings.

Within the context of my work, I am one of the few African American males who work in an elementary urban school setting, dominated primarily by female educators. I have experienced many instances when serving as a disciplinarian seemed to be my expectation, as many of the students I work with do not have fathers or father-like role models in their lives. I also believe that a perception that others have of me is that of being able to relate to my students' needs because we share the same ethnicity. One implication of my identity is that there are many instances where I, too, struggle with finding the best ways to reach the needs of students.

These experiences have allowed this researcher to develop relationships with the potential participants who could potentially participate in this study. These established relationships could allow an opportunity for participants to provide fruitful discussions about the mentoring experiences they have received from their principals. Lastly, this research will examine and incorporate the participants' lived experiences as a representation of the perceptions and conceptions they have constructed about mentorship, which supports the methodological approach applied to this dissertation.

Self to System/Society

I am an African American born within the United States. While I am a citizen of this country, my ethnicity, as an African American male, also plays an integral part in how society views me. The deeply rooted racial inequities and injustices within our community heighten the perceptions that others could have about me simply because of my ethnicity. One overtone that I continually reflect on, based upon existing societal views, is that I have to work harder to prove that I possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and abilities to be both a productive and contributing member to society.

Researcher Worldview

In addition to establishing a research methodology that will inform a study, a researcher must also consider their worldview. Developing a worldview connects to the lens a researcher brings to the topic under examination (Stake, 2010). In qualitative research, researchers typically assume a worldview perspective of constructivism, post-positivism, pragmatism or transformative as the primary paradigm introduced within a study. Creswell (2014) also interprets the research approach as the broad "plan or proposal to conduct research, involving the intersection of philosophy, research design, and specific methods" (p. 5). He further reiterates that a researcher must examine the worldview assumptions held at the outset of conducting a study. Guba (1990) also explains that a worldview as a "basic set of beliefs that guide action" (p. 6). Both Guba (1990) and Creswell (2014) agreed that a worldview is, in part, a researcher's general philosophical orientation about their world and biases one brings to a research study.

This study was approached incorporating the worldview framework of constructivism. The constructivist framework employs elements from a sociological perspective in which knowledge connects to the human development of individuals and cultivates through the daily interactions with others (Glense, 2016). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) posited that all cognitive functions originate in the social interactions of others and that learning does not merely comprise the assimilation and accommodation of new knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) contends that education is a cyclical process by which individuals learn from their broader community to which they hold an affiliation. This process helps to form a learning community and promotes the idea that learning, and development is an ongoing evolving process. Through this

perspective, constructivists maintain that "learning is a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experiences" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 62).

Furthermore, constructivism is a worldview tradition initially credited after the seminal works of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Husserl. The framework of constructivism asserts that reality for individuals is socially constructed and interpretative (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) further maintained that using a constructivist paradigm involves a researcher who seeks to understand the process of interactions between individuals, particularly looking at the context of where individuals live or work to draw meaning from their experiences.

Mertens (2015) ascertained that exploring research from a constructivist lens allows the researcher to "understand the complexities about the world in which an individual lives and to also gain an understanding from those who have experienced it" (p. 17). Again, Mertens (2015) claimed that using a constructivist paradigm suggests that research is a "product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them" (p. 17). Experiences as an elementary assistant principal have played a part in the formation of the beliefs about how this researcher views the leadership development and mentoring skills that assistant principals receive from their principals, which would prepare an assistant principal for becoming a principal. This study desired to gain insight into each participant's unique experience and the perceptions and conceptions they hold about mentoring. Indistinguishably, this research relied on open-ended questions that were broad enough to allow the participants to construct their individualized meanings from the experiences of mentorship (Creswell, 2014).

Strategies to Ensure Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is an "interpretative form of research" that often is compared with principles used with analyzing quantitative studies (Krefting, 1991, p. 215). Krefting (1991) posited that since the nature and scope of qualitative research differ in nature and scope, "applying principles such as validity and reliability, often associated with quantitative analysis, is inappropriate for a researcher conducting a qualitative study" (p. 215). According to Payne and Williams (2005), a qualitative researcher applies generalizations to their research based on their study's findings to support their claim or theory. Sarma (2015) further suggested that qualitative researchers incorporate alternate ways to ensure the trustworthiness of a research study, and the appropriate level of rigor is used in your data analysis. To this end, the use of Shenton's (2004) criterion based on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) was incorporated to ensure appropriate and trustworthy strategies were used to inform this dissertation study's findings. This required addressing the following components to establish trustworthiness and credibility for this study: (a) creditability, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

First, credibility within qualitative research is important because it seeks to justify how specific factors have contributed to a particular outcome. Maxwell (2005) asserted that the use of multiple sources and data collection methods, known as triangulation, dramatically improves a researcher's credibility. Moreover, the research approach of phenomenography was employed to conduct this study and relied upon previous research to frame the context for this study. Additionally, this research study included multiple data sources to ensure that credibility is established. Individual interviews were with elementary assistant principals and principals to understand the mentoring experiences and conceptions that elementary assistant principals

received from their principals. The data analysis used in the study involved coding participant responses using Atlas.ti Version 7 (Berlin Software, 2013) to establish emergent themes to build credibility. Thick descriptions were incorporated to see if connections or ideas emerged from the participant's responses regarding the mentoring experiences elementary assistant principals receive from their principals.

Second, transferability in qualitative research refers to whether the findings of your research study can be applied to other similar contexts (Creswell, 2014; Guba, 1990; Shenton, 2004). Since this study sought to explore the mentoring experiences elementary assistant principals received from their elementary principals, the findings from this study would most likely be a "Naturalistic Generalization" (Stake, 2005) for future research. Naturalistic generalization is a process where readers gain insight by reflecting on the details and descriptions presented in qualitative research. As readers recognize similarities in phenomenological features and find themes that resonate with their own experiences, they consider whether their situations are similar enough to warrant generalizations. Naturalistic generalization invites readers to apply ideas from the in-depth depictions presented in qualitative studies to personal contexts (Melrose, 2009).

Third, a qualitative study's dependability is drawn from triangulation and in-depth methodological descriptions that potentially allows for the duplication of your research (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). The steps taken during this research project were documented so that a replication of this study is possible for future research, if desired, to produce a similar study by following the details reported in the methodology section of this proposed study. Overlapping research methods were used to support the dependability of this study.

Lastly, confirmability refers to the research findings' subjectivity and neutrality of the phenomenon investigated (Creswell, 2014; Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). There was strict adherence to the study's research questions and propositions to avoid collecting and analyzing information that was not relevant to this study. The phenomenon explored the mentorship experiences of elementary assistant principals provided by their elementary principals. In conducting this study, great care was taken to adhere to the research questions and propositions approved by the dissertation committee.

The use of data triangulation also ensured confirmability. For this study, interviews, researcher notes, and a review of secondary documents was used during data collection. Further, the use of a constant comparative method also helped to identify the emergent themes throughout data analysis. Table 5 details further information regarding the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability approaches that were used to guide this dissertation study.

Table 6

Strategies to ensure trustworthiness

Assurances	Strategies
Credibility	The researcher spent some time before the interviews begin establishing trust with the participants. The researcher informed principals and principals about confidentiality of their information and assure them that their identity will remain protected. The researcher selected principal and elementary assistant principal pairs from a variety of the elementary schools in the district under study. The researcher used information gathered from the interviews correctly helps to establish theories about the

Table 6 Continued

	mentorship experiences of elementary assistant principals.
	The researcher ensured that I asked the questions in the same manner consistently with all participant groups.
Transferability	The researcher developed a thick description of the research findings that can be transferred to a larger population.
	The researcher selected diverse participants with varying years of experience, ages, and backgrounds will provide transferability among other schools and districts.
	The researcher described the population, context, and methodology employed for this research study.
	The researcher conducted member checking to ensure the removal of researcher bias in this study.
Dependability	The researcher used overlapping methods in order to establish dependability of this study.
	The researcher had work reviewed to determine that the processes are accurate.
	The researcher created a Phenomenology graphic.
Confirmability	The researcher discussed any bias in interviewing and coding.
	The researcher identified any ethical issues or concerns with the methodology.
	The researcher identified any limitations to this research study.
	The researcher identified any bias when triangulating the data from the interviews.
	The researcher removed as much bias as possible when talking to elementary assistant principals, principals, and other school leaders.

Ethical Considerations

The conducting of any research study requires that a researcher examine and outline a set of ethical standards that guide the researcher's work. The American Psychological Association (APA) and Kennesaw State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) have delineated a set of standards researchers must follow. The establishment of ethical guidelines ensures the rights, safety, and dignity of all research participants, all aiming to provide honesty and integrity while conducting a research study. In exploring the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant provided by their elementary principals, the researcher established ethical principles that guided this study. Table 6 (below) delineates the ethical considerations that were upheld while conducting this dissertation study.

Table 7

Researcher Ethical Considerations

Ethical Principal	Steps to ensure ethical consideration
Anonymity	The researcher verified that all research participants know that their personal information or the information they share in your study will remain private. The steps taken to provide participant privacy are storing data securely, respecting the expressed wishes of research participants, and taking every possible action step to avoid errors during the research process.
Informed Consent	researcher informed research participants about all the aspects of the research study is important so that the

Table 7 Continued	participant make an informed decision about whether or not they choose to participate in the study with you, as the researcher. I would also ensure that I add a disclaimer about vulnerable populations.
Honesty	Ensuring that you are "always" honest and forthcoming about your research study helps to establish trust between you and the research study participants. It also ensures that you operate with the highest level of personal integrity.
Seeking Appropriate Approval	The researcher completed the necessary approval steps before conducting research study. This would include any of the following: (1) Seeking IRB Approval if conducting research as a graduate student or (2) Seeking the various approval chains if conducting research within a school district as an independent researcher
Confidentiality	The researcher verified that research participants understood that their research responses and participation in my research remains confidential, and they could withdraw his/her participation at any time.
Selecting an appropriate Research Design	The researcher verified that the research design selected for my study aligns to the type of study I plan to conduct. The selection an appropriate research design is critical to ensuring that your research study aligns to the overall purpose and goals you set out to accomplish from your research.

Relationship between Researcher/Participants	The researcher maintained an honest and positive relationship with your research participants is important. Therefore, this researcher will provide clear and targeted outcomes to the participants for his/her participation in the research study. Also, remaining open, as the researcher is an additional opportunity for you to ensure that you are establishing and maintaining a relationship of trust, during research.
Positionality	The researcher acknowledged the importance of explicitly stating your positionality and discuss any biases that could influence your study's findings. In addressing any researcher bias, this researcher will discuss the ways to avoid any bias impeding the integrity of your research.
Selecting the right research protocols	The researcher selected the right protocols and vet these protocols to make sure that they seek to accomplish the task for what you intend to seek in your research study.

Chapter Summary

Chapter three of this dissertation provided readers with insights into how the researcher conducted the methodology for this research study. More specifically, this chapter included a discussion about the researcher's worldview and role, goals for the study, research approach and tradition, and research questions that guided this study. The context and setting of the research site, which included demographic data was included. Furthermore, a review of participant selection, access to the site, and anticipated data collection for this study was also discussed. Finally, chapter three concluded with an explanation of the data analysis process and strategies to

ensure trustworthiness, including ethical considerations. In the next chapter, the findings for this

study will be presented in further detail.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter four presents the thick descriptions from this phenomenographical qualitative research study (Sin, 2010; Thomas, 2006). Primarily, the purpose of this phenomenographical study was to explore the lived experiences and conceptions that elementary assistant principals have about the mentorship they receive from their elementary principals. Secondly, this research study sought to investigate how self-identified elementary assistant principals with the desire to one day become a principal are prepared through mentorship from their elementary principals to become principals eventually. Finally, the data collection for this research study included one-on-one experience descriptor participant interviews, participant observations, reviewing district leadership documents, and researcher notes to triangulate data.

The question driving this research study was:

1. What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principal's experience mentoring from their elementary principals?

A Deeper Portrayal of the Study Participants

Results for this phenomenographical study were gathered during eight participant interviews. As described in Chapter 3, participant selection was based on a criterion to ensure that this research study could capture the lived experiences of the phenomenon being investigated from the personal accounts of the study participants. Creswell et al. (2007) noted a fundamental purpose for conducting qualitative research involves the researcher identifying a sample population who is familiar with or who can share a personal account from the phenomenon being probed. The results section of this study also included background

information about each participant, which helped frame the connections to their individualized

lived experiences of the phenomenon explored in this study. What follows is a brief description

of each of the participants.

AP Lauren

AP Lauren brings a wealth of outside school improvement experience to her school. In

fact, she previously worked for the state Department of Education and spent a great deal of time

working within the school on developing school improvement initiatives. AP Lauren believes

that her prior experience is an asset to her role as an assistant principal, particularly when

working with teachers to improve their instructional practices. Before this current school year,

AP Lauren worked within her school setting alongside an additional assistant principal

colleague. However, her school experienced budget cuts this year, which resulted in AP Lauren

becoming the only assistant principal. This change in dynamics has shifted some of the

responsibilities that AP Lauren supports daily within her school setting. Finally, AP Lauren

expressed that she is eager to begin pursuing a principal position at the end of this current school

year.

AP Naomi

AP Naomi is a third-year assistant principal and is the youngest assistant principal that

participated in this study. AP Naomi is a current doctoral student and mentioned that she

appreciates that her doctoral seminar classes offer an opportunity to learn more about

instructional leadership. AP Naomi also mentioned that sometimes she feels that teachers do not

take her seriously because of her age. Actually, AP Naomi mentioned that sometimes she feels a

bit uncomfortable with the fact that she became an assistant principal before the age of 30 years

old. Moreover, while interested in becoming a principal, AP Naomi also expressed that she is equally interested in pursuing a higher education career. AP Naomi believes that working within the higher education setting can be an asset to future school leaders because she can share her experiences as an assistant principal.

Another interesting fact about AP Naomi is that her previous principal left her school within one month of her new appointment as an assistant principal. Furthermore, AP Naomi expressed that when her new (current) principal arrived at the school, both were new to the school and their respective leadership roles. AP Naomi further expressed that she believes in many ways, she and her principal are learning and growing together. Lastly, AP Naomi is an avid proponent of equity and works daily to support teachers with including culturally responsive practices within their daily teaching.

AP Charlie

AP Charlie is an assistant principal who really believes in the influence of building a strong school culture. During his interview, AP Charles really discussed at length how he enjoyed being primarily responsible for school tasks related building a strong school culture among students and the staff. Even more interesting, AP Charlie was a member of one the first leadership cohort that was offered within this school district. Lastly, AP Charlie is also currently a member in the district's current aspiring principal program and hopes to become a principal within the next one to two years.

AP Rylee

AP Rylee is a current assistant principal within a school setting where her principal previously served as a teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal, and now principal.

Because AP Rylee works with a principal who has a deep understanding of the school and community, she believes that her principal can help develop her leadership skills. AP Rylee has a passion for professional learning and consistently seeks out opportunities to continue to learn and grow in the area of best practices for educational school leaders.

AP Roger

AP Roger is an assistant principal who is completing his second year in this role. Prior to joining the school district under study, AP Roger had previous leadership experience in a different school district where he served as both a teacher leader and instructional coach. AP Roger expressed that his previous leadership experience, coupled with having a prior principal mentor him really helped his leadership cultivation. He mentioned that his previous principal provided him with additional leadership responsibilities which he equates to his preparation for the role of becoming an assistant principal. Finally, AP Roger is an active member of several leadership organizations and has presented at various school leadership conferences around the best practices of school leaders in education.

Principal Obama

Principal Obama is entering into his third year as an elementary school principal. Principal Obama has previously served in a variety of leadership roles within the school district under study. In addition, Principal Obama received district-wide recognition for his school leadership contributions when he was an assistant principal. Principal Obama also believes that a principal's role is complex and that this position requires one to understand why he or she wants to pursue this position. Also, Principal Obama believes that the cultivation and leadership of an assistant principal is heavily dependent upon the personal convictions and internal motivation

that drives the desire to become a principal. In summary, Principal Obama believes in developing school leaders, not only at the assistant principal level but also at all levels and for all staff who aspire to learn and grow.

Principal Margo

Principal Margo is a veteran and seasoned principal within the district under study. Even more interesting is that Principal Margo never served in the capacity as an assistant principal. Rather, Principal Margo served as an Instructional Liaison which shared similarities with an assistant principal's role and responsibilities. Principal Margo has served as a mentor to several principals and assistant principals throughout her tenure within this school district. In time, Principal Margo shared that she believes that school leadership requires one to have a balance between his/her professional and personal life. Principal Margo expressed that this belief shapes the leadership perspective she approaches in terms of leadership development.

Principal Luck

Principal Luck is a school leader who works with intentionality around building a strong school culture. Principal Luck often works side-by-side with his leadership team, and he consistently finds new and innovative ways to engage his staff. In terms of leadership, Principal Luck has presented at several district meetings and has served as a mentor to several aspiring leaders within the district under study. Finally, Principal Luck is the only participant with both elementary and secondary experience, which gives him a broader scope about the work of school leaders.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. Table 8 provides the categories of

descriptions and the associated codes by research question followed by the emergent

themes.**Table 8**

Categories of Descriptions and Their Associated Code Families, by Research Question

RQ. What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principals' experience mentoring from their elementary principals?	
Emerging Themes	Coded Families (Sub-Themes)
Assistant Principal's Leadership Development	Tasks and responsibilities of an assistant principal Formal leadership development.
Assistant Principal's Experiences of Principal Leadership Development	Principal leadership style and experiences Instructional leadership
Assistant Principals and Principals' Mentorship Experiences	Mentoring relationship cultivation Mentorship personal definition

Emergent Themes

The participant interviews resulted in three distinct emergent themes: Assistant

Principal's leadership Development, Assistant Principals' Experiences of Principal Leadership

Development, and Assistant Principals and Principal's Mentorship Experiences. All three

emergent themes are directly linked to the research question that guided this research study.

Within those three emergent themes, subthemes also appeared and assisted in the disaggregation

of the research findings.

Theme One

Assistant Principal's Leadership Development was the most prevalent and centered on

the experiences that assistant principals' shared about their leadership development within their

current role. All research participants talked about a myriad of responsibilities associated with an

assistant principal's job role and provided very explicit examples of how this work-related directly to his/her own leadership development within their current job role. Additionally, the experiences that participants shared revealed that an elementary assistant principal's leadership development is multi-faceted and unique to the specific roles and leadership responsibilities afforded them directly from their elementary principals.

Theme Two

Assistant Principals' Experiences of Principal Leadership Development emerged as the second most prevalent theme from these research participants. This theme addressed principal leadership style from the lived experiences that elementary assistant principals and elementary principal's participants shared during their interview. Both elementary assistant principals and elementary principals shared insight into how instructional leadership and being afforded responsibilities in this area of school leadership is a critical component for developing the skillset of an assistant principal for a principal's job role.

Theme Three

The theme of Assistant Principals and Principals' Mentorship Experiences focused on how each participant viewed mentorship, and how mentorship supported the leadership development and relationship cultivation between an assistant principal and principal. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that each participant had a personal view about mentorship and how the cultivation of a mentoring relationship is established between an elementary assistant principal and an elementary principal from each participant's personal experiences. Figure 3 below displays the prominent categories of themes that surfaced from this study.

Figure 3

Visual representation of the Prominent Categories of Themes
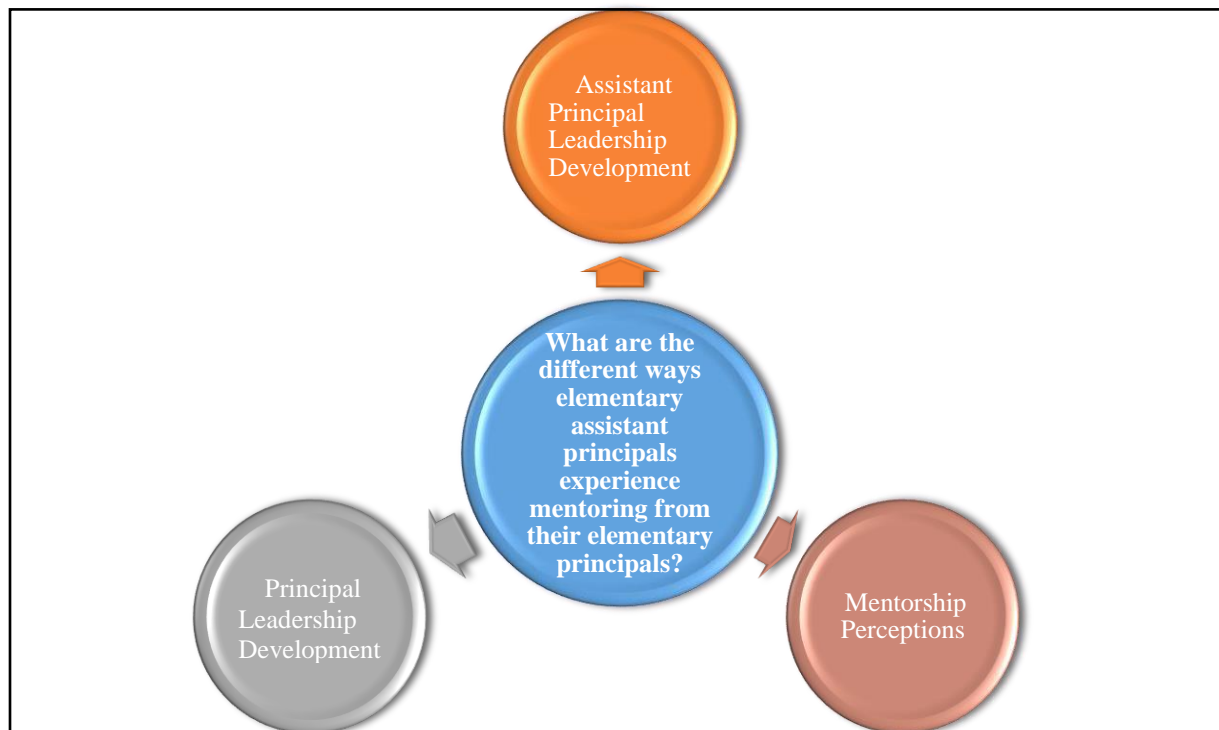
Furthermore, an examination of the data is illustrated in Figure 4 (below). Figure 4 characterizes the total number of iterations for each emergent theme of description used in this study. Thick descriptions and triangulation of data sources that helped support this phenomenographical research study's credibility and trustworthiness are also incorporated. Hence, through the interpretation of the data analysis process, a more in-depth analysis of the lived experiences and different ways that elementary assistant principals received mentorship from their elementary principals is shared.**Figure 4**

Example Total Number of Iterations for Each Emergent Descriptor Theme

Emergent Theme Descriptor Iterations

Theme	Value
Assistant Principal Leadership Deveopment	265
Mentorship Perceptions	121
Principal Leadership	172
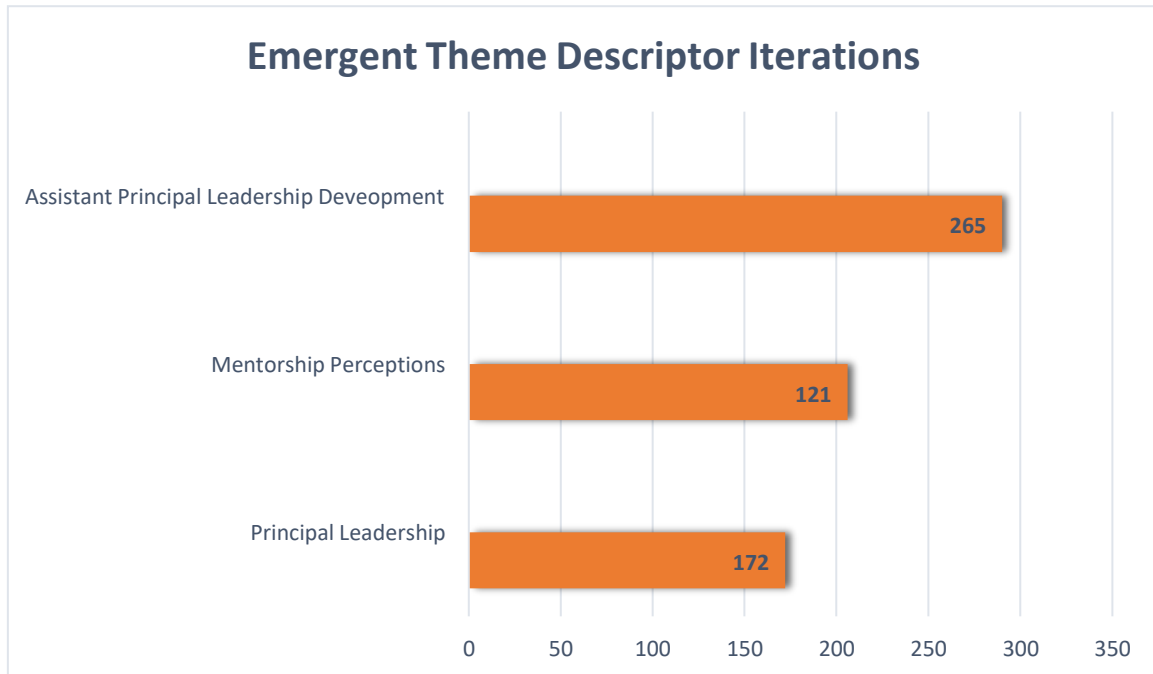
Explanation of Findings by Theme

The following themes emerged from the data collected in this study: assistant principal's leadership development, assistant principal's experiences of principal leadership development, and assistant principal and principal mentorship experiences. The research themes resulted from the participant's feelings, experiences, and the conceptions they expressly shared throughout this study. In the following sections, the data from each theme will be explained in great detail. The first theme that emerged was assistant principal's leadership development.

Theme One: Assistant Principal's Leadership Development

This theme included three specific sub-themes that directly related to the leadership development opportunities afforded to elementary assistant principals that help develop them for a principal's role. The sub-themes that emerged from this major theme included:

(1) Tasks and responsibilities of assistant principals

(2) Formal Leadership Development

Assistant Principal's Leadership Development

      The interview process and discussion, review of district documents, and analyzing participant responses around an assistant principal's leadership development was a crucial aspect for understanding the complexities and experiences that both elementary assistant principals and elementary principals discussed regarding their lived experiences. Interestingly, many of the participants expressed a collective understanding that an assistant principal's leadership development was predicated on how they are provided leadership opportunities directly from their elementary principal.

      A review of leadership documents, job descriptions for principals and assistant principals, leadership tool kit artifacts and principal professional learning guidance focused on: leading academics, building culture, developing talent, and managing operations. The substantive review of these district-related leadership documents emphasized the importance of school leaders being well versed in best practices of effective school leadership, particularly emphasizing their engagement in a variety of responsibilities that are significant for a principal know to effectively lead a school.

      When analyzing participant responses around the theme of assistant principal leadership development, AP Lauren declared: "sometimes I don't feel like my feel like my assigned tasks are preparing me for the role of the principal because most times, principals don't do these jobs." Participant, AP Naomi, shared a belief that '50% of the knowledge you learn within a school setting contributes to your overall readiness for a principals' role'. What is more, this district's

job description for the role of an assistant principal expressed clearly that an assistant principal is to "consider him/herself as an apprentice to the principal."

AP Lauren affirmed that her leadership growth and development is a result of her "direct job" experience and the opportunities she receives from her principal. Similarly, AP Naomi and Principal Obama shared that the 'communication' between a principal and assistant principal enhances the opportunities and ways in which an assistant principal develops their leadership skills. Collectively, a finding among principal and assistant principal responses highlighted feelings that an assistant principal's leadership development heavily involves the extent to which opportunities are afforded to engage in a variety of school-based leadership experiences. Some prevailing sentiments expressed by the assistant principal participants involved budget development, instructional practices, school operations, and handling conflict resolution. For example: AP Lauren specified: "My principal allows me to have some input in the school budget development process." Even more, AP Naomi explained: "I'm definitely being prepared in how to handle conflict resolution by principal." Similarly, AP Roger articulated: "I believe my principal is attempting to prepare me with various responsibilities so I can see the entire range of work required of a principal." AP Charles exacted that his experience covered a gamut of opportunities that extended from being directly involved in school culture initiatives to being able to lead weekly data meetings. As AP Charles conveyed, his personal leadership developed focused primarily on the ways and opportunities he has to experience different leadership responsibilities. All assistant principal participants universally exclaimed that understanding the school budget is a quintessential part of the leadership development of an assistant principal.

AP Roger reported that his leadership growth and development has centered on how he and his principal continually work together as "thought-partners" when leading their school. AP Roger believed that the partnership between a principal and assistant principal in many ways is more important than the level of leadership exposure an assistant principal receives daily. Furthermore, AP Roger also expressed numerous times that the relationship component between a principal and assistant principal is almost as important as an assistant principal's being exposed to variety of leadership tasks. AP Roger also described the relationship between a principal and assistant principal as a "marriage" where both individuals have to work daily to establish and maintain a high degree of trust and is an ongoing process of getting to know one another.

In comparison, AP Rylee maintained during her interview that she appreciated how her principal allows her to take "risks" without being micromanaged. She emphasized that she feels a large contributor to her leadership development stems from her principal's ability to challenge her thinking by "questioning" her rationale for a lot of the decisions she makes as a school leader.

Principal Margo expressed that she is always cognizant about how the ways she develops the skillset of her assistant principal. Actually, she shared in her interview that she focuses on the development of her assistant principal by scheduling time to specifically identify targeted "goals" she can support in developing her assistant principal. Additionally, this participant expressed that she extends leadership opportunities to her assistant principal by facilitating opportunities to "observe" her model different leadership scenarios and then engage in dialogue to explain her thinking around why certain leadership decisions were made.

. Regarding an assistant principal's leadership development, Principal Luck shared a poignant analogy when he stated that it is important for an assistant principal to "establish their leadership legs", and to be provided with the space and opportunity to make some school-wide leadership decisions.

The participant discussions regarding the leadership development of elementary assistant principals summarized the myriad of opportunities and insights each participant thoughtfully shared regarding their own lived experience. The researcher noted that when participants were asked to describe the ways they believed their principal has or is preparing them for a principal's job role, many of the participants took moments to pause and reflect about their own experiences before they provided a specific response about his/her/their leadership development. More notably, the researcher was also able to ascertain that many of the participants provided concrete examples that mirrored connections to some of the secondary documents reviewed, which helped to support data triangulation around the questions presented around the leadership development of an assistant principal. For example, AP Naomi shared in her interview that she gets plenty of experience this year with coaching teachers directly in the classroom setting. This experience directly related to secondary source documents which explained that a principal's role must encompass ongoing teacher coaching and development. Likewise, AP Charles described experiences where he is able to carry out activities to ensure that his teacher's feel appreciated. This example related to secondary source documents which emphasized the importance of a principal's role with retaining talent within their school.

Sub Themes

Tasks and responsibilities of assistant principals. When asked if the tasks assigned to assistant principals are preparing them for the responsibilities of a principal, each assistant principal responded with a "yes, but..." as they also shared their personal insights that every assistant principal has a different experience within their school setting. For example, AP Roger noted: "My principal allows me to take a stab at tasks that typically a principal is responsible for handling." As discussed by AP Naomi: "My principal allows me to experience all aspects of school leadership and operations." Among the principal participants, three of them expressed that assigning tasks to assistant principals really depends on assessing their strengths and areas for growth.

Significantly, the participants' responses relative to this sub-theme revealed that elementary assistant principals experienced a variety of responsibilities that they directly linked to the role of the principalship. As an example, AP Charles described how his principal provides him with a lot of leadership responsibilities focused on building school culture when he stated, "she gives me a lot of the responsibility of building culture, and that is important for principals to know how to manage staff."

AP Naomi's experience also mirrored opportunities to engage in school-wide culture-building activities. During her interview, she explained that "being over culture and climate is really important, as well as safety and security." Conversely, AP Rylee described that her leadership development centered heavily on school operational aspects of school leadership, such as being involved in "school-wide master scheduling."

AP Rylee revealed that she is exposed to a lot of the technical aspects of school leadership, such as: scheduling, testing, school safety and security, and facility management. She

described that her principal places a heavy emphasis on an assistant principal being able to know the core technical aspects involved in running the school environment.

Principal Obama explained that assistant principals need exposure to a variety of opportunities to learn new things. Specifically, he remarked, "The biggest thing is to expose assistant principals to the work." When further probed by the researcher, Principal Obama elaborated about the "work" being an intentional focus on including your assistant principal in on as many aspects of school leadership as possible. In sharing, the researcher noted that the facial expressions of this participant showed some excitement when discussing the importance of assistant principals receiving the opportunity to learn in many areas.

AP Charles stated in his interview in October 2020, "I am allowed to lead different school-based meetings or attend different trainings, which enhances my knowledge about school leadership." AP Naomi described a similar experience when she candidly discussed how her principal "makes me attend meeting with her so that I am always kept in the loop of what is happening."

Some findings from the participants uncovered that elementary assistant principals received very minimal exposure to school budgeting, which each assistant principal participant identified as a critical element of a principal's role during their interviews. The generation of comments expressed by assistant principal respondents related to their direct experience around school budgeting acknowledged that this is an area where they received minimal development. Specifically, some of the assistant principals indicated the following: Specifically, assistant principals indicated their minimal experiences and development in areas of school budgeting. For example, AP Charles shared: "While I get a lot of experience, I am unfamiliar with how the

school budget works." AP Naomi declared: "I get to be in charge of safety, testing, and discipline… but I rarely get to look at things related to the school budget." Similarly, AP Lauren affirmed an experience that mirrored AP Charles's experience about school budgets when she shared "I haven't had any direct experience with understanding the budget." AP Rylee also added to discussion about school budget when she also stated: "I would like to be more involved in the school budget and really learn how it's completed from start to finish."

The participants conveyed positive feelings regarding how their assigned responsibilities and tasks are linked to what they perceive as responsibilities associated with a principal's role. The respondents shared a variety of experiences related to how they experience a vast range of responsibilities that helped to development his/her/their own leadership development for a principal's job role. As an example, AP Naomi explained that her principal continually develops her leadership development by providing her with direct experiences germane to school operations and instruction. More specifically, she shared: "my principal is preparing me to become a principal by pulling me into different areas in the school and stretching my knowledge in a lot of different areas. This broadens my overall leadership lens."

In a similar way, Principal Obama discussed that he strives to afford his assistant principal opportunities to demonstrate her leadership before the entire school staff. He shared: "I like to find opportunities for my assistant principal to get in front of the staff and deliver information. It is important for them to see her as a school leader." The insight shared by Principal Obama reflected a sentiment identified in this school district's leadership plan, which emphasizes the role of a principal to consistently "support teacher and leader growth".

AP Charles described one of his responsibilities this school year involves bolstering his direct experience around data-driven instruction. He identifies his increased focus on understanding data as: "I'm getting my taste in what a principal does, and I am getting some experience in understanding and analyzing school-wide data, and how to make school-based decisions using data." AP Rylee reflected on her experience around building consensus with community stakeholders. She recalled how her principal provides her with opportunities to have more experience with responsibilities related to community partnerships. In her reflection, she noted that her principal often reminds her: "building strong community relationships is one of the most important roles of a principal."

AP Roger's reflected on how his principal allows him to take risks to help develop his leadership for a principal's role. In his interview, he recalls taking opportunities this year to implement school-wide activities to help engage staff members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Distinctly, AP Roger recalls how he has taken the initiative to lead what he describes as 'Wellness Tuesdays'…He further shared: "I come up with different activities and lead them during our Tuesday faculty meetings to help keep our staff engaged." This leadership experienced that AP Roger spotlights links to an area of concentration that this school district has for school leaders (*principals*) to find opportunities to develop school-wide culture practices through social-emotional learning. To give an instance, this school district describes an effective leader practice as: "providing professional learning experiences that support teachers and staff in building social emotional competencies."

In contrast, AP Lauren specifically commented: "sometimes I do not feel like my assigned tasks are preparing me for the responsibility of the principal because most of the time,

the principal does not do these jobs, they just oversee them." Interestingly, the point of view communicated by AP Lauren subtly mirrored a reflection of Principal Luck during his rumination about the specific responsibilities that APs are provided that are linked to the principalship. For example, Principal Luck declared: "sometimes principals have different views because the district does not give any consistent guidance around a clear set of tasks, we should give APs."

Formal leadership development. The participants' experiences regarding their formal leadership development evoked many participant feelings that mirrored in similarity, while also unveiling the unique conceptualization regarding their understanding of formalized leadership preparation. The overarching experiences of the participants ranged from graduate school learning to school-based opportunities for leadership. AP Lauren commented that she felt that her formal training in her master's degree program "only slightly prepared her for what was required of a school principal."

AP Charles chronicled his leadership development as a balance between graduate school and his on-the-job training when he served as an instructional coach. AP Charles elucidated that his formal leadership development provided theoretical relevance about school leadership; however, a large portion of his learning came from his experience as an instructional coach in a previous school district.

AP Roger highlighted that his formal leadership development focused on the importance of curriculum and instruction, but very few of my courses stressed the other things you would need to know as an assistant principal. AP Roger shared that his leadership development was a balance between his principal working with him to sharpen his skills by giving him opportunities

to assist with different leadership tasks that assistant principals and principals must know. More accurately, AP Roger reminisced, "my principal actually made me learn assistant principal duties, and I took on a lot of the duties and responsibilities around testing, operations, all while I was still in the role of an instructional coach."

AP Lauren shared that her formal leadership development focused on instructional leadership areas but not a great deal of emphasis placed on school operational leadership. Further, AP Lauren, provided a very descriptive connection about her formal leadership development. She explained that she was a coach, grade-level department chairperson, and obtained her masters and educational specialist in educational leadership. She further shared that, "Through my graduate school preparation and leadership roles, I got a change to get a lot of hands-on experience."

Contributor, AP Naomi, acknowledged that her doctoral program is preparing her think about the best practices principals should use to effectively run a school. This participant also explained that her coursework also focuses heavily on innovative models to meet the needs of diverse student learners. While also discussing her advanced graduate school preparation on school leadership, this participant made a point to explain that graduate school only "gives you 50% of the knowledge that you need to be an effective school leader."

Principal Luck explained, "I believe that my formal preparation or leadership training only slightly prepared me for the principalship." Similarly, AP Rylee explained that their formal leadership development did not prepare them for leadership and shared, "I learned more about leadership after becoming an instructional coach within this district."

Theme Two: Assistant Principal's Experiences of Principal Leadership Development

This theme included two specific sub-themes that directly related to the leadership development that elementary assistant principals provide to their elementary principals that help to develop them for the role of a principal. The sub-themes that emerged from this major theme included:

(1) Principal Leadership Style and Experiences

(2) Instructional Leadership

Assistant Principal's Experiences of Principal Leadership Development

This theme elucidates the different avenues of how elementary principals exemplify their leadership styles that work to develop the skillset of their elementary assistant principals. Among all participant interviews, there was a clear distinction in the way that each individual described the specific attributes of how they experience principal leadership development. The assistant principal participants all shared that they felt the leadership provided by their principal was an effective means that helped to shape their leadership growth. The principal participants expressed that they believed it was crucial for them to provide additional context into the intricacies that come with the role of being a principal. A common statement among the discussions regarding the leadership development provided by elementary principals was "I believe that my principal is preparing me to be a principal."

The AP participants expressed that principal leadership development contributed greatly to their confidence as they continue to grow in their own leadership development. They repeatedly remarked that their principals were encouraging, provided opportunities, and supportive. Equally, the principal participants echoed sentiments of wanting to serve as a coach

to their assistant principals. Principal Luck illuminated an outlier perception when he shared, "Your assistant principal must know why they want to become a principal." One central conception emerging around this theme, which is discussed later but, as respondents dialogued about their experiences of principal leadership, it became evident that principal leadership is a significant factor in developing an assistant principal's skillset.

Sub Themes

When unpacking the experiences of these assistant principals and how they experienced leadership development from their principals, it became apparent that a principal's leadership and style coupled with an assistant principal's direct experience with instructional leadership was a key area that supported the leadership development of an assistant principal.

Instructional Leadership. Findings among these group of elementary assistant principals showed that they engage in instructional leadership aspects within their roles. AP Charles noted that his instructional leadership experience spans from his direct involvement in leading specific grade levels. Correspondingly, AP Naomi highlighted that she had taken the initiative this year to work with teachers and lead some professional development sessions.

AP Lauren's experience around instructional leadership highlighted that she has only recently gotten the opportunity to engage in more instructional activities because her priority has focused heavily on school operations. Several participants shared experiences around instructional leadership and even provided examples. Specifically, AP Charles noted: "My principal and I share different grade level teams to support instruction." In a like manner, AP Rylee remarked: "I am given the change to lead from an instructional standpoint with teachers. This is a much different experience for me from my first year as an assistant principal." Both AP

Charles and AP Roger affirmed: "I am involved in facilitating weekly data meeting with my assigned grade levels." Similar to the other assistant principal respondents, AP Naomi also conveyed: "My principal helps me out with school operations tasks so I can spend more time with instruction and supporting our teachers."

As an outlier from the other participant's experiences, AP Roger presented a unique perspective on instructional leadership when he discussed that there are mutual learning and engagement discussions around the best instructional practices with his principal at his school because of the differences in both of the content levels of expertise. AP Roger's response revealed that although the primary role of a principal is to sufficiently prepare an assistant principal with the experiences and skills necessary to lead a school from an instructional lens, there are instances when the instructional leadership development is a mirrored experience of growth for both the assistant principal and principal.

AP Lauren reflected on and conveyed that, "I can spend more time on instructional things." Furthermore, AP Lauren elaborated about how sometimes being involved in so many different operational things that happen in a school can distract your focus from the instructional aspect of school leadership. In a similar manner, another participant shared that, "This year, I have been able to get into more of the nitty gritty of instruction."

Further, a review of the district's secondary documents pertaining to the instructional leadership of its school leaders emphatically stated that an expectation of principals and assistant principals is to spend at least 80% of their day directly involved in supporting school-wide instruction. Many of the elementary principal respondents provided examples of supporting their elementary assistant principal's growth around instructional leadership by referring to this

district's leadership guide identifying and included examples such as Principal Luck who stated: "I make sure my assistant principal is involved in data-driven decisions around instruction." Principal Margo shared: "I allow my assistant principal to attend district leadership meetings with me so she is aware of any instructional mandates schools must enforce."

Both Principal Luck and Principal Obama shared similar thoughts around the importance of including their assistant principals in the process of instruction through the aspect of classroom observation. As an example, Principal Luck noted: "I conduct frequent classroom observations with my assistant principal so that he is aware of what good instruction should look like a classroom." Likewise, Principal Obama emphasized: "This year, I hired a school business manager so that I could spend more time with my assistant principal observing what is happening in classrooms."

Principal Leadership Style and Experiences. The theme associated with principal leadership style and experiences uncovered various responses among the participant groups of elementary assistant principals and elementary principals. Most elementary principal responses yielded their leadership style to provide a space and opportunity for their elementary assistant principals to extend their leadership scope and lens through various experiences. Principal Luck elaborated that with his assistant principal, he wants to make sure that he is "giving him some chances to take some risk." Principal Margo also described a goal for her assistant principal as, "So I think her role, and goal for this year is to listen, make some small strides and help us whatever it is in terms of getting kids back acclimated, because this is a different year to come back into the building."

Among the elementary assistant principal's responses, they described that they perceived the leadership style and perceptions they have of their elementary principals as one that helps to develop and advance their current leadership. Also, elementary assistant principal participants made connections to their principal's leadership style and experiences they hold about them through the lens of communication, mentoring, or mentorship behaviors they have experienced. For example, AP Rylee affirmed, "but specifically with my principal, I think I'm really being mentored well, because she doesn't shut me out, and her leadership style is collaborative. I know that I have experienced from other APS that they really don't have a good working relationship with their principal, and they are shut out of a lot of things." AP Naomi remarked during her interview that her principal practiced effective communication between them. More precisely, she recounted, "So she communicates very frequently, and, um, efficiently." (Interview, October 2020). In affirmation, AP Roger recalled, "I think what has also helped is he shows me what to do."

A recurring statement reflected across both the elementary assistant principal and elementary principal interviews highlighted that open communication was an important aspect of a principal's leadership style. Both AP Rylee and AP Lauren described their principal's leadership styles as collaborative and one where they felt safe enough to talk about additional leadership areas where they felt experience is needed for their leadership growth. In addition to communication being a prevailing statement, many of the participants also discussed how being given opportunities to lead within their schools helped to reinforce how they perceived the leadership style of a principal. An example provided by AP Roger who stated, "I feel like my principal gives me plenty of room to try and lead in different areas."

Likewise, AP Lauren discussed how her principal allows her to support different content areas within their school setting. She further elaborated about a time when she wanted to learn more about the dynamics of the special education department at her school. She recalled her principal telling her to attend some of their meetings to learn more about the team. This participant equated this experience as her principal being a "cheerleader" for my growth and development.

Theme Three: Assistant Principal and Principal Mentorship Experiences

This theme included two specific sub-themes that directly related to the mentoring experiences provided to elementary assistant principals that help to develop them for the role of a principal. The sub-themes that emerged from this major theme included:

(1) Mentoring relationship cultivation.

(2) Mentoring personal definition.

The third theme of description was assistant principal and principal mentorship experiences. Throughout the discussion around this theme, it is important to note that all participants (assistant principals and principals) provided very personalized descriptions regarding how they define mentorship and, more specifically, how mentorship manifests itself between individuals. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated their experiences involved aspects and elements of (a) open communication, (b) feedback, (c) engagement in activities, and (d) opportunities to cultivate personal relationships between individuals.

AP Roger eloquently phrased his experiences of mentorship as a "marriage" between two individuals with levels of understanding, commitments, and vulnerability. AP Rylee's response stood out to the researcher because of her body language. During her interview, this

researcher noted that AP Rylee used more voice inflection, and her demeanor illuminated a greater level of enthusiasm as she described the multiple ways, she and her principal worked together to form a relationship not only rooted in her leadership development, but also taking time to learn more about each other personally. As an example, AP Rylee illuminated: "My principal is really one of the best principals in this district. She and I text each other every day and she always want to make sure I am in a good place with my work."

AP Lauren, AP Naomi, and Principal Luck collectively shared similar sentiments that mentorship is an opportunity for an assistant principal to engage in leadership tasks and have a safe space where feedback is given and received to bolster personal growth. Principal Obama echoed that mentorship really involves understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the person you are mentoring but remaining aware that you should provide opportunities to capitalize on an individual's strengths.

A reflection shared from Principal Margo is that mentorship is a relationship whereby two individuals become "thought partners and not afraid to share ideas, thoughts, or ideas." Generally, this reflection in some ways captured the collective understanding that all participants attached to their individual understandings of mentorship.

Sub Themes

Mentoring relationship cultivation. One of the most significant themes emerging around the relationship cultivation around mentorship identified that this relationship is a cyclical process, whereby both individuals provide amble contributions to the development of this relationship. Many of the elementary assistant principal participants described mentorship as a two-way relationship that involves both individuals contributing to how the relationship develops

and how it continues to grow over time. AP Roger mentioned that his principal told him, "I am not going treat you how his principal treated him."

AP Rylee and AP Naomi both referenced mentorship as an "informal and formal way to learn from one another." Even adding that over time, you can actually become friends with your principal because of this relationship. This respondent made a point to discuss how the relationship between he and his principal is one of genuine respect and care for one another.

AP Naomi related how she leverages mentorship as her opportunity to get feedback from her principal regarding how she leads other staff in their building. An example, she recalled, "I go to my principal to always get feedback on my feedback to others." Moreover, this individual also shared that because of the relationship she has cultivated with her principal, she is equally able to provide feedback to her principal as well about different things that may come up in regard to their shared leadership.

The majority of principal respondents made a point to highlight that communication was the most critical element of how the mentoring relationship forms and is sustained between an assistant principal and principal. Principal Obama explained communication is quintessential for him because "I have to know what my assistant principal knows or what they do not know, and this is only established through strong communication."

Principal Margo reflected that mentorship of her assistant principal is of absolute importance. She gave the example, "If I leave the school today or tomorrow, my assistant principal needs to know how to run this building." This reflection highlights the importance of communication and how an assistant principal and principal must work together to remain informed of what is happening in a school to ensure that both school leaders remain equally

informed. Principal Margo also elaborated about the importance of her assistant principal being a "thought-partner" for her in the work. As she describes, "I need to hear from my assistant principal. It doesn't mean I am going to do everything she suggests, but her opinion matters."

Principal Luck explained that his mentorship to his assistant principal gives him a chance to "sit back, observe, and provide coaching" to my assistant principal. As he further reiterated, one of his goals to ensure that he has a well-rounded assistant principal who is ready to become a principal, if that is what he wants to do. Principal Luck elaborated on how the cycle of observation and coaching helped to build trust between him and assistant principal, which allows him to give his assistant principal honest feedback to help him grow in his overall leadership development.

Mentoring personal definition. Each participant uniquely described his/her own personal definition regarding how they loosely define the term of mentorship. The majority of participants believed that a mentor is someone who provides help, support, and encouragement to an individual. AP Naomi described mentorship as a relationship where someone is a "blank canvas" being filled with information.

AP Naomi experienced mentorship as means to "build a strong and trusting relationship with someone" where I am given some space to reflect on my practice and grow. AP Rylee commented that mentorship to them is the chance to "see, mirror, and learn" from a seasoned leader. Principal Obama believed that mentorship involves your ability to learn new "perspectives" from others. He further recalled learning from a veteran principal who really invested in helping to shape his leadership development.

AP Charles's shared his belief that mentors and mentees both work together to build trust and respect. He describes how a mentor is someone who should "take you under their wings and show you the nuts and bolts" of school leadership.

While all participants provide an individualistic perspective about how they define mentorship, the findings spotlighted a few key sentiments across all participants, which were: coach, confident, and supporter. Additionally, there was an expressed notion that mentorship is defined as a mutual exchange between two individuals who commit to providing an investment in one another.

Outcome Space

In a phenomenographic study, the researcher seeks to uncover the qualitatively different ways individuals experience the phenomena under investigation to determine the outcome space (Kahn, 2014). The outcome space involves the researcher analyzing the data to decipher if there is a relationship between the emerging themes from the categorical descriptors highlighted by the research participants. (Forster, 2016; Kahn, 2014). The relationship between the prominent themes and sub-themes is outlined in Table 9, which informs the outcome space from this research study. The outcome space will identify the emergent themes, sub-themes, and quintessential statements (participant quotations). Marton (1992) substantiated that the outcome space illuminates the contrasting conceptions participants have about how they experienced the phenomenon from a second-order perspective. The amplification of the second-order perspective in phenomenography emphasizes the qualitatively different ways by which individuals understand their personal connections in how they understand a discrete phenomenon.

Table 9

Outcome Space Table

What are the different ways elementary assistant principals experience mentorship from their elementary principals?

Prominent Theme	Sub-Themes	Participant Quotations
Assistant Principal Leadership Development	. Tasks and responsibilities of assistant principals . Formal leadership development	This year, I have been able to get more into the nitty gritty of instruction. – AP Naomi I get a chance to go in and out of classrooms to observe teachers. – AP Charles So currently, I am in charge of scheduling. – AP Rylee My formal preparation has prepared me to do a lot of operational things. - AP Lauren I believe that my formal preparation or leadership training only slightly prepared me for the principalship. - AP Naomi I want to know how to run a budget, how does it relate to our school improvement plan. – AP Lauren I get a lot of experience with building school culture. – AP Charles
Principal leadership development	. Instructional leadership. . Principal leadership style and perceptions	Sometimes I don't feel like my assigned tasks are preparing me for the responsibility of the

Table 9 Continued

		principal. - AP Lauren
		My principal throws me into situations and experiences, so I get firsthand experience about the best solutions for the issues at hand. – AP Naomi
		You have to take inventory of your AP to find out if they want to be a principal, and also understand their why for wanting to become a principal. – Principal Obama
		I spend a lot of time on operational things and want to spend more time in the area of instruction. – AP Lauren
Mentorship perceptions	. Mentoring relationship cultivation. . Mentoring personal definition	I am learning a lot from principal because he was an assistant principal. – AP Roger
		I appreciate my principal and her mentorship. We talk about what my goals are, what I plan to do, and what can be done differently as I prepare for my next role. – AP Lauren
		I have a voice with my principal, and she listens to me, and seeks my input. – AP Naomi
		I think the mentorship with my principal is good because I get to see what she is doing. – AP Charles
		I appreciate that my principal does not shut me out… so I think I am being mentored well. – AP Rylee

The above-referenced table presents some of the qualitatively different ways that elementary assistant principals experienced aspects of mentorship and leadership development from their elementary principals. Mentorship perceptions are the most insubstantial way elementary assistant principals describe how they internalized a concrete connection of mentorship and its direct connection to an elementary assistant principal's leadership development. The variations in participant conceptions were, in part, due to each participant possessing their own definition of what they perceived as useful elementary principal mentoring behaviors. Assistant principal leadership development provided the most robust responses and variations of experiences from participants. Participants were able to give rich descriptions about his/her assigned tasks, and their conceptions about how these tasks related to the responsibilities linked to the role of a principal.

Trustworthiness of Study

To support the quality of findings in this study, this researcher employed triangulation of data sources: (1) participant interviews, (2) review of district job descriptions for assistant principals and principals, (3) reviewing district's internal website for school leaders, (3) review of district documents related to leading academics, building culture, developing talent, and managing operations, (4) review of researcher notes and memos; as well as reviewing existing literature of the best practices of data analysis within qualitative research. Furthermore, this researcher also used various code reports and network analysis reports within ATLAS.ti to help establish the meaning of each participant's data. A thorough review of the data sources was conducted, including interview transcription, quoting, and coding, while comparing findings to

journal notes or memos. Through a detailed analysis and a comprehensive triangulation of the data, thick and rich descriptions of the phenomenon under study were highlighted.

Strategies to Ensure Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is frequently measured against criteria more aligned for a quantitative researcher (Creswell, 2013). Guba (1981) outlined a more naturalistic approach for qualitative researchers to use when measuring the trustworthiness of their research findings. Along these lines, four distinct criteria have been established in qualitative research to determine the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability.

First, credibility refers to having credence in the results of the research findings (Payne & Williams, 2005). To form credibility, the researcher: (1) spent time establishing rapport with the research participants prior to engaging in the interview process; (2) triangulated data using interviews, researcher notes, and reviewing secondary source documents related to the phenomenon under investigation; (3) developed thick descriptions of the phenomenon through descriptions of the context and participants; (4) provided research participants' with the opportunity to review the accuracy of the interview transcripts and withdraw from the study at any time, which included before, during, or after their interview; (5) integrating a diverse population sample, which provided a variety of insights and enhanced the overall collective perceptions of the phenomenon explored.

Second, Shenton (2004) described transferability as the means to demonstrate research findings to other contexts. To establish transferability, the researcher provided thick descriptions

of the interview data to allow the findings to be transferred from the context being explored to the researcher during analysis.

Third, dependability refers to the ability to show consistent results that can be duplicated (Shenton, 2004). The researcher provided dependability by: (1) describing in-depth a description of the research methodology and data analysis procedures; and (2) utilizing member checking to review and ask questions to assess the accuracy of the research findings (Gonzalez, 2010).

Lastly, confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality and value of the research findings (Creswell, 2013; Guba, 1981). The notion of confirmability is insistent on the degree to which the research findings are influenced by the participants and not inclusive of any researcher bias. The researcher affirmed confirmability by: (1) engaging in member checking throughout the data analysis process; (2) providing a detailed description of the research methodology used to analyze participant findings; and (3) integrating data triangulation through interviews, researcher notes, and reviewing secondary source documents.

Limitations of Findings

One limitation that is evident in this study was the duration of this research project. An additional limitation is the fact that the researcher is a current elementary assistant principal within the school district under investigation. Furthermore, a limitation of this study is if this study were replicated, would the research findings have the same or similar outcomes? The sample size of this study was also a limitation. Although smaller sample sizes are preferred for qualitative research and the participants were identified through purposive sampling, it is plausible that a larger sample size would have yielded rendered more variation in participant experiences and responses.

Although the participants provided thick descriptions of their lived experiences of their mentoring experiences, including more participants would likely strengthen data between the participants and their lived experience of the phenomenon explored. Additionally, a limitation to this phenomenographical study is the researcher's interpretation of the data. The honesty that participants shared with the researcher is another possible limitation that could impact the findings of this study. In exploring the mentoring experiences that elementary assistant principals received from their principals, there is no way to generalize these findings to the experiences of other assistant principals. This study only looks at elementary assistant principals within one large school district.

Summary

Producing a phenomenographical study involves establishing a connection between the research question and the phenomenon being explored (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997; Giorgi, 1999). This study aimed to gain a better understanding of how elementary assistant principals experienced mentorship from their elementary principals. Accordingly, this chapter discussed the insights and ways that elementary assistant principals and elementary principals described how they perceived and conceptualized the mentoring experiences that they received from their elementary principals. Furthermore, this study also illuminated the emergent descriptive themes of assistant principal leadership development, principal leadership development, and mentorship perceptions, all of which directly represented the participants' lived experiences.

In summary, this chapter aimed to answer the research question and contribute to the field of educational leadership about the experiences and perceptions elementary assistant

principal's associate with mentorship and its influence on their leadership development for a principal's role. As well, this study provided a deeper understanding of how elementary assistant principals and elementary principals experience and conceptualize mentorship aspects as a means of leadership development. Ultimately, this study identified how mentorship influences an elementary assistant principals' leadership development based on the participant's individualized perceptions and their lived experiences. In the following chapter, a detailed discussion on the findings is provided as well as implications for future policy, practice, and research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study focused on exploring the ways that elementary assistant principals experienced mentorship from their elementary principals as they are prepared for a principal's role. Furthermore, this study examined the ways in which elementary assistant principals lived experience of mentorship served as an avenue of leadership development from their elementary principals for a principal's role. Eight participants, five elementary assistant principals, and three elementary principals participated in a semi-structured interview to share their lived experiences and perceptions about how they receive mentoring from their elementary principals. This qualitative phenomenographical study was guided by one research question related to the intellectual quest of this study:

1. What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principal's experience mentoring from their elementary principals?

Contained in this chapter are the following: a) summary of the findings through the lens of the conceptual framework; b) discussion of findings through the perspective of the theoretical-conceptual framework; c) limitations of the study d) implications for practice; and e) recommendations for practice and future research, and conclusions.

Summary of Findings through the Perspectives of the Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, this study is guided by two distinctive theoretical orientations: Badura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT); and Uhl-Bien and Graen's (1995) leader-member exchange theory (LMX). The integration of this theoretical-conceptual framework provided a foundation for understanding how the dyadic relationship between an elementary assistant principal and

elementary principal concurrent with the leadership experiences and mentorship that elementary assistant principals receive from their elementary principals would prepare him/her/them for a principal's role. The use of this theoretical-conceptual framework was valuable in understanding the differing perspectives that these elementary assistant principals illustrated as they conveyed how the mentorship provided by their principals advanced their leadership skills for a principal's role.

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory contends that the acquirement of an individual's behaviors derives, in part, from the associations that exist between one's environment and the human interactions they encounter. This study investigated the ways elementary assistant principals received mentorship from their principals, and how these experiences strengthened the leadership development that assistant principals received directly from their principal's. More importantly, this theory provided a more robust approach to understanding how mentorship as a way of leadership development prepares an elementary assistant principal with the necessary skills and behaviors required for a principal's role.

Furthermore, investigating mentorship through the context of SLT supported the researcher with interpreting how elementary assistant principals constructed their conceptions about the leadership development they received directly from their principals. Specifically, applying SLT to aspects of the relationship cultivation existing between an elementary assistant principal and their elementary principal, interpretations derived highlighted if an elementary assistant principal experienced a positive or negative outcome space in how they conceptualized their lived experience of the phenomena investigated. Concerning this study, the outcome space

explored whether or not elementary assistant principals associated a negative or positive

perspective of their leadership development based on the range of responsibilities and

experiences provided to them by their principals from the perspective of SLT. Hence, this

experience serves as a catalyst undergirding how an elementary assistant principal

conceptualizes their all-inclusive leadership development and its effectiveness towards preparing

them for a principal's role. Some conversations among these participant's revealed personal

connections akin to the distinctive, elements associated with SLT, such as expectancy,

observation, modeling, reinforcement, and observation. Moreover, findings from this study also

highlighted some perspicacious feelings that these elementary assistant principals felt were

fundamental in correlating how they believed their leadership development advanced through the

support provided by their principals. A few extracted reflections that participants summarized,

which elucidate the correlation between SLT, and their lived experiences of leadership

development were described as follows from the respondents:

> AP Lauren emphasized: "I believe my principal is now attempting to prepare me to become a
>
> principal by giving me various responsibilities so I can see all aspects of leadership"
>
> (Interview, October 2020). AP Naomi's sentiments revealed: "My principal is requiring me
>
> to be a well-rounded school leader."
>
> Principal Obama expressed: "I really capitalize on the strengths of my AP and push them to
>
> grow in areas where they are not always comfortable."
>
> AP Rylee mentioned: "I think my principal does a good job giving me opportunities. She
>
> allows me to take on tasks, and then gives me guidance along the way."

These congruous insights reinforce how SLT can frame how an individual conceptualizes their leadership development and to what extent this development is reinforced through the direct experiences that one is exposed to within their environment. Even more, many of the feelings conveyed by the participant are closely aligned to what Rotter (1954) asserted as vital when exploring the role of *expectancy* as a condition of SLT. Rotter's (1954) stance of expectancy centered on how the intensity of the engagement one receives in his/her/their environment stimulates conditions that enhance feelings of value attached to specific tasks or experiences. Furthermore, this feeling of *value* as Rotter (1954) defined it is also closely associated with how one also attributes a greater sense of motivation, which ultimately drives the behavior(s) that one regards towards a specific skill or task. In this study, elementary assistant principals discussed how their responsibilities not only provided them with leadership development, but also bolstered a curiosity which spurred a desire to seek out new learning to support their continued growth as a school leader.

To illustrate, during AP Lauren's interview, she discussed her desire "to learn more about how the school budget works." Her cognizance/awareness around this aspect of her leadership development provided a space where she felt safe enough with her principal to have a conversation about her desire to learn additional skills. She explained:

> I met with my principal and we talked about areas where I need to grow. We
> decided to set some goals and one of my goals is to learn more about budget, and
> my principal agreed that this is something I need to know, and she would work
> with me on how to develop and understand our school budget.

AP Charles also recognized that school budgeting is an area where his current leadership experience is limited. As he noted: "I have no experience with the school's budget and this year my principal said she is going to give me some areas of the budget to learn because I need to learn this." This insight also demonstrates how SLT can influence behaviors, but more significantly, bolster the behavioral capabilities of an individual. Interestingly, the participants in this study addressed how the leadership experiences with their principals actuated internal revelations about their own leadership development, which produced behavioral insights from these elementary assistant principals about how their leadership needs could be further developed and supported directly by their principals.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Correspondingly, using LMX provided a framework to uncover the perceptions that elementary assistant principals held regarding the values they believed were germane for establishing a strong relationship with their principal and how this relationship results in an assistant principal experiencing leadership growth. LMX posits that the relationship cultivation between a manager and subordinate (principal and AP) is a dyadic linkage that is only cultivated through levels of consistent engagement and mutual accountability from both parties (Dansereau et al., 1975). For this study, the aspects of LMX were explored and applied how elementary assistant principals and elementary principals viewed mentorship as an effective means for developing the leadership skills of assistant principals.

Insights discovered from the participants focused on how mentorship was associated with feelings of mutual trust, collaboration, and commitment from both parties (mentor/mentee). AP Naomi illustrates: "I love that my principal is my mentor because I have a voice in my learning,

and not just a blank canvas being filled. AP Naomi's perspective supports what Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) described as 'role-taking' and 'role-making' in a dualistic transactional relationship established through the perspective of LMX. AP Naomi's experience encapsulates how she perceives her mentoring relationship with her principal as one in where both parties show a mutual investment in how the relationship is cultivated and enhanced. Principal Obama explained that he values: "open lines of communication" as he outlined what he felt was an important trait in the relationship between a mentor and mentee. In all instances, participants' emphatically reinforced that a viable mentoring relationship stemmed from how you viewed the relationship and the efforts that both parties contribute to develop and cultivate this *authentic* relationship.

Through examination of the three data sources, three descriptive categories emerged: (1) assistant principal leadership development, (1) principal leadership style, and (3) mentorship perceptions. These descriptive categories support answers to the research question. Thus, the findings reviewed in chapter five will be organized by each emergent theme related to the overarching research question for this dissertation study.

Theme One: Assistant Principal's Leadership Development

Concerning theme one, the findings revealed the following descriptive sub-themes: (1) tasks and responsibilities of an assistant principal and (2) formal leadership development. Conclusions about this theme are categorized below based on the findings within these two categories.

Tasks and Responsibilities of an Assistant Principal

This theme brought out various sentiments in terms of how elementary assistant principals experienced their own leadership development. Examples provided from participants included statements reflections noted by AP Naomi who stated: "I believe my principal is attempting to prepare me with the various responsibilities for what a principal must know and do in a school" (AP Naomi, personal communication, October 2020). Also, AP Rogers maintained: "I am involved in instruction and going to involved in professional learning communities where I can support teachers" (AP Rogers, personal communication, October 2020). AP Charles disclosed in his reflection, "I get to work on tasks that focus on building culture in the school" (AP Charles, personal communication, October 2020). In a similar way to the reflections shared from the assistant principal participants, some of the principal participants also highlighted why tasks provided to assistant principals are important.

To give some examples, Principal Obama stated: "I take a step back and allow my assistant principal to lead staff meetings and leadership team meetings" (Principal Obama, personal communication, October 2020). Principal Luck affirmed: "The biggest part of this job and role is to make sure you expose your assistant principal to the work required of a principal, and to make sure that he/she gains experience in a variety of duties around school leadership."

Need for Expanded Opportunities

Neumerski (2013) claimed there is a need for principals to infuse opportunities that extend the scope of an assistant principal's leadership development and job role to encompass a wide range of skills, respectively providing assistant principals with opportunities that build their capacity around the decisive responsibilities required for a principal's role. Among participants,

the results of the data revealed that elementary assistant principals engaged in a variety of extended leadership opportunities within their school contexts One of the inferences that can be drawn from assistant principal responses about tasks and responsibilities can be linked to empirical literature that argues that the role of the assistant principal is complex (Barnett et al., 2012; Marshall & Holley, 2006; Armstrong, 2004; Reed, 2011).

Ambiguity of Roles

Moreover, Weller and Weller (2002) substantiated that the assistant principal's role is often characterized as "role ambiguity" (see: Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012; and Sun & Soho, 2012), a role with obscure responsibilities. Broadly speaking, the participant's responses in this study uncovered findings consistent with previous research that maintained the notion that assistant principals often experience different roles and responsibilities within their schools settings. The findings from these research participants could still infer that at some level, the tasks provided to assistant principals are not concentrated to a specific set of responsibilities that would ensure that all elementary assistant principals experienced the same leadership roles or responsibilities within any school setting.

Flexibility of Job Tasks

Responses from the elementary principal participants described an overwhelming willingness to allow their assistant principals the flexibility to engage in different tasks designed to expand their leadership perspective. In fact, Principal Luck emphasized in his interview that he needs to allow his assistant principal to "establish his leadership legs." This participant's insight about his assistant principal's leadership development reinforced an argument raised by Van Tuyle (2018) who discussed the importance of principals providing comprehensive

opportunities for an assistant principal to increase their range of leadership responsibilities within a school.

The elementary principals provided congruous reflections that elucidated their role being one of a developed of individuals. As an example, Principal Margo described: "I am a developer, who I think goes along with the role of a principal...You must develop others in your building." This suggests that some elementary principals recognize their role and importance in providing leadership development opportunities for their assistant principals. Marshall and Hooley (2006) posited that very school districts and leaders provide professional development opportunities for assistant principals to expand their leadership skillset. Contrary to some implications purported within research, this group of elementary principals provided a contrasting viewpoint about affording assistant principals with experiences that expand the scope of their leadership perspective.

Throughout the interviews, participants verbalized that they felt their leadership responsibilities aligned with tasks appropriate for preparing them for a principal's role. These reflections supported assertions made by Holmes (1999) and later reinforced by other researchers such as, Bloom and Krovetz (2009) and Retelle (2010) who claimed that principals must provide intentional ways to develop and grow the leadership of their assistant principals. Interestingly, an additional discovery among the participant interviews acknowledged previous research which surmised that an assistant principal role is multi-faceted and complex in terms of the tasks delegated to them by their principals. Participants in this study shared leadership experiences that ranged from managing school operational to engaging in tasks that had an instructional related focus. These implications uphold previous research postulations that argued many assistant

principals experience a greater range of role ambiguity due to not having a succinct job role (see Armstrong, 2009; Glanz, 1994; Good, 2008; Kwan, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski, 2012; Oliver, 2005; Nieuwenhuizen & Brooks, 2013; Oleszewski et al., 2012; and Sun & Soho, 2012).

Formal Leadership Development

Findings within this theme uncovered that participants had mixed experiences in terms of how their formal leadership prepared them for their leadership role. One commonality that emerged amid the respondents was that their formal leadership preparation exposed them to the best practices leadership theory and curriculum and instruction, but their lived experience of leadership took place once they received a leadership role. Wallin (2006) and Olson (2008) highlighted in their research that more professional development is needed in the area of instructional leadership for aspiring and current school leaders.

A few respondents shared that they received leadership development through an aspiring leaders program offered through the school district. The vast majority of participants associated their formal leadership development with obtaining an advanced graduate degree. Based on the responses from the participants, there is an implied notion that after receiving their leadership preparation, these leaders do not frequently engage in leadership development opportunities that continually cultivate his/her leadership development outside of the development received directly from their principals. According to Enomoto (2012), Marshall & Hooley (2006), and Oleszewski et al. (2012) leadership preparation alone at the university level does not adequately prepare individuals for the challenges they will face in a school-based leadership role.

What is more interesting is that this district has a set of leadership specific documents that outline the core competencies and expectations required for their school leaders, but no participant referenced the use of these documents as a tool used to support ongoing professional development or formal learning. Reported in the literature is that school leadership teams must have a solid understanding of the instructional practices that will positively impact student achievement (Aguilar, 2013; Gurley, 2015; Searby et al. 2017). However, this study found that while elementary assistant principals engaged in various leadership tasks provided by their principals, there may also remain an underlying feeling of ill-preparedness concerning the lack of formal leadership experiences designed to reinforce an assistant principal's leadership cultivation (Oleszewski et al., 2012, Hunt, 2011, and Sun, 2011).

Theme Two: Assistant Principal's Experiences of Principal Leadership Development

The following descriptive categories were revealed in the findings: (1) instructional leadership and (2) principal leadership style and perceptions. Conclusions about this theme are presented below and organized based on findings in the two categories.

Instructional Leadership

In describing instructional leadership, elementary assistant principals discussed some of the activities that they believed aligned their work to instructional leadership. For example, one of the assistant principals highlighted: "this year, I have been able to get into more of the nitty gritty of instruction." Within the salient literature, there has been a consistent call for school leaders to engage in work that emphasizes a focus on instructional leadership (Barnett et al., 2012; DuFour, 2001; Gurley et al., 2015; and Oleszewski et al., 2012). When asked the specific

question: "*Describe the ways that you believe your principal has prepared you for the position of a principal?*" some of the elementary assistant principals presented the following reflections.

AP Charles disclosed: "I assist with planning and the facilitation of math data meeting this year with the upper grades teachers, but this is new for me this year." AP Lauren further added to this point when she communicated: "I can spend more time with the instructional things because my principal is helping me with some of the workload around operational things (i.e., scheduling, lunch duty, and bus duty." Likewise, AP Ryle indicated: "My principal has made it a point this year for me to work very closely with our ELA instructional coach to better understand the learning standards for K-5" In a contrasting manner to the responses of the other assistant principals, AP Roger expressed: "I think I am not being mentored as much in instruction by my principal."

The aforementioned narration highlights how elementary assistant principals experienced a wide range of lived experiences in terms of being directly involved in instructional related school tasks. The discussions among the participants emphasized a sentiment expressed by Celiken (2001) that suggests instructional leadership is not a primary focus area related to the work of an assistant principal. Even more compelling is that one assistant principal recognized that not being involved more in instructional leadership inhibited his leadership development. This individual shared: "I want more experience with instruction so that I become more comfortable with leading in this area." This assistant's lack of experience strengthened the assertion that assistant principals often experience limited opportunities to engage in tasks focused on instructional leadership. Furthermore, results from the participants did not uncover any discussions regarding how their connection to instructional leadership reinforced practices

that aligned their work towards a concentrated focus on student achievement (Gurley et al., 2015).

Principal Leadership Style and Perceptions

The discussion around the leadership styles and elementary principal perceptions raised a consensus among both groups of individuals that participants felt that they received a sufficient level of support from their principals that aided in enhancing their leadership development. The insights illuminated from the elementary assistant principals emphasized that their principals provided them with frequent communication, modeling, and offered coaching support in areas they lead. These findings are in direct contrast to what Gutmore (2015), and Kwan (2009) argued regarding the current role of an assistant principal is not preparing these leaders to become a principal. Participants in this study shared that their principals provided them with ample opportunities to experience school-based leadership in different areas, which reinforced assertions presented in Goodson's (2002) study maintaining that the assistant principal position as an apprentice role for becoming a principal.

<div style="text-align:center">Theme Three: Assistant Principals and Principals' Mentorship Experiences</div>

Regarding theme three, the findings revealed the following descriptive sub-themes: (1) mentoring relationship cultivation and (2) mentoring personal definition. Summarizations about this theme are categorized below based on the findings within these two categories.

Mentoring Relationship Cultivation

Among researchers (Coelli et al., 2012; Dimmock, 2012; Hansford & Enrich, 2005; Spiro et al., 2007; and Warren & Kelson, 2012), there have been ongoing discussions regarding the benefits of mentorship and its influence on developing individuals, particularly assistant

principals. Mentorship in general is not an area on which research has focused, particularly in terms of the development of an assistant principal (Dimmock, 2012). Participants in this study associated their experiences of mentorship as a form of coaching designed to improve the skills of an individual. One participant defined a mentoring relationship as: "an informal way to learn from one another." Their description of a mentoring relationship being used to informally develop a school leader reinforced aspects of this study's theoretical-conceptual framework that asserted the relationship dynamic between an assistant principal and principal is a cyclical relationship stemming from ongoing interactions and experiences. By way of illustration, one participant stated: "I like that I can go to my principal to receive feedback on things I am doing." Surprisingly, the discussions around mentorship relationship cultivation produced an all-embracing sentiment of *communication* being a glaring factor in how this relationship is developed and maintained over time.

The participant's continued understanding that communication is a vital aspect of cultivating a mentoring relationship can infer that establishing a strong mentoring relationship first centers around how individuals cultivate their own respective communication styles. In fact, AP Lauren related communication in a mentoring relationship as being able to show that both the assistant principal and principal are a "cohesive unit." The representation of an assistant principal and principal forming a unified stance infers that mentorship also relates to how you establish trust as a leadership team. AP Roger also reinforced a similar feeling that mirrored AP Lauren when he elaborated about how his mentoring relationship with his principal was one where they both "guide each other…even becoming friends at some point."

Mentoring Personal Definition

Participants in this study shared that they believed mentorship is closely aligned with an individual who provides support, coaching, and modeling to an individual to help advance his/her own development. A few of the respondents related their personal definition of mentorship as a reflective practice where you learn not only about your mentee, but you learn more about yourself as the mentor, and how this role is critical for supporting the growth and development of the individual who is learning from the experiences and knowledge you share with him/her/them. An example of this is illustrated when Principal Margo shared: "As a mentor to my assistant principal, I need them to know how I think and make decisions. If I decide to walk out tomorrow, the school does not need to shut down because I did not share the knowledge."

Principal Margo understood there was value in the role of a mentor being a conduit of learning, and that she has a knowledge- base of experience, and she recognized the responsibility to share her knowledge with her assistant principal. Principal Drew discussed and emphasized that is role in supporting his assistant principal through mentorship involves releasing responsibility and allowing him to lead. More exactly, Principal Drew feels that: "My mentorship with my assistant principal is supposed to allow him to lead, take risks, and know it's a part of learning." Understanding that growth and development focuses on providing safe spaces of opportunity, Principal Drew demonstrates that he effectively utilizes mentorship as a way to support how his assistant principal experiences opportunities to take the lead within their school environment.

Examining mentorship through the perception of reflection provided an additional frame of reference for understanding how an individual first begins to understand mentorship, and then to further begin to develop and engage in a mentoring relationship between two individuals.

Limitations of Findings

One limitation that is evident in this study was the duration of this research project. An additional limitation is the fact that the researcher is a current elementary assistant principal within the school district under investigation. Furthermore, a limitation of this study is if this study were replicated, would the research findings have the same or similar outcomes? The sample size of this study was also a limitation. Although smaller sample sizes are preferred for qualitative research and the participants were identified through purposive sampling, it is plausible that a larger sample size would have yielded rendered more variation in participant experiences and responses.

Although the participants provided thick descriptions of their lived experiences of their mentoring experiences, including more participants would likely strengthen data between the participants and their lived experience of the phenomenon explored. Additionally, a limitation to this phenomenographical study is the researcher's interpretation of the data. The honesty that participants shared with the researcher is another possible limitation that could impact the findings of this study. In exploring the mentoring experiences that elementary assistant principals received from their principals, there is no way to generalize these findings to the experiences of other assistant principals. This study only looks at elementary assistant principals within one large school district.

Implications of Findings for Educational Practice

This phenomenographical study addressed one main research question related to the goals of this study; 1) What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principals experience mentoring from their elementary principals? This study was particularly useful in exploring the influence that mentorship has on the lived experiences that elementary assistant principals received from their elementary principals in preparation for a principal's role. The findings in this study indicated that the role of an elementary assistant principal is still varied and a multi-faceted school leadership role, but there are benefits to elementary assistant principals receiving mentorship from their elementary principals. Participants in this study illuminated that they felt that mentorship provided them with a layer of leadership support as they grow in their leadership roles. Moreover, findings also indicated that the participants believed that they were supported and experienced additional leadership opportunities that helped to prepare them for a principal's role.

This phenomenographical study also highlighted the importance of how exigent it is for principals to provide leadership opportunities to their assistant principals to advance their skillset for their next level of school leadership – the principalship! Further, this study also uncovered that assistant principals still experience multitudinous job responsibilities within their respective roles, which aligned to findings consistent within the research that accentuates the role of an assistant principal as obscure in the duties and responsibilities each assistant principal manages within a school setting. The assistant principals interviewed all agreed that while they experienced leadership opportunities, there is still a need for assistant principals to engage in more opportunities around instructional leadership and school budgeting. Collectively, the

assistant principal participants believed that this was an area where they received minimal mentorship from their principals.

The elementary principals interviewed shared that they believed their leadership, guidance, and support aided in developing the leadership prowess of their assistant principals. Both elementary principals and assistant principals believed that a strong mentoring relationship is sustained through the ongoing communication that occurs between a principal and assistant principal. When asked to define and describe the mentoring experiences, each group of school leaders emphasized how communication was the crux of how a strong mentoring relationship evolves between an elementary assistant principal and principal. Ultimately, findings from this study gave prominence to the fact that school leaders in this district did not receive any formalized training on mentorship. As a result, each elementary assistant principal and principal perceived mentorship differently and were introspective in how they conceptualized the important aspects required of a strong mentoring relationship between a principal and assistant principal. Ok. This is just reiterating what you have said multiple times. What does this mean for practice? What are your recommendations?

Implications of Findings for Educational Policy

The extant research literature is rife with research that focuses on a principal's leadership as a critical factor in determining a school's success (Spilane & Lee, 2014). As research has confirmed, there is no uncertainty that effective principals are a determinant in how a school is managed and resultantly the achievement outcomes that manifest because of his/her leadership. In fact, over the past few years, educational policy and governing institutions have shifted in their certification practices to ensure that individuals certified at the principalship level engage in

a series of rigorous performance-based coursework to ensure they meet the bar of expectations that would be required of them in a principal's role (GAPSC, 2020).

Addressing the certification process for aspiring school leaders who seek to learn about the requirements needed for a principal does not negate the responsibility of educational reform policies that address the ongoing professional development needs of current assistant principals at local and national levels. Furthermore, there remains a lack of policy that provides specificity for how the leadership needs of assistant principals are integrated within the scope and context of their everyday work in schools. Throughout this study, it became evident that there remains a vast range in the overall responsibilities and leadership development that each elementary assistant principal received from their principal. Results indicated that while assistant principals received leadership development within their roles, the more pressing question remains, does their current leadership development sufficiently or insufficiently prepare an assistant principal for a principal's role.

This study explored how assistant principals received mentorship from their principal as a form of leadership development. A finding relative to the educational policies in place for school leaders was a recurring need for assistant principals to experience more opportunities focused on their precise needs and leadership development. While the primary responsibility of an individual's growth and development is based on his/her/their awareness and desire to seek out new learning, there remains a responsibility for constituents of education policy to advocate for the needs of not only principals but assistant principals whose roles are designated as second in command within a school. Expressly, this study exposed a need for school district's, universities, and educational state and national policymakers to develop policies that address the leadership

competencies needed for assistant principals, and subsequently construct performance indicators for school districts and school leaders that align precisely to the leadership needs of an assistant principal that reinforce specific leadership skill development to reinforce the competencies needed for an assistant principal to acquire the leadership training for a principal's role.

Implications of Findings for Future Research

This study prompts the following future research questions:

1. Would the emerging themes in this study apply to other assistant principal groups such as middle school or high school assistant principals when exploring their mentoring experiences?

2. What are the different ways that school districts provide formalized mentoring support to assistant principals?

3. In what ways do school districts provide formalized mentoring support to principals who are mentoring their assistant principals?

Suggestions based on these questions are provided in the following paragraphs.

Future Research

Investigating the mentoring experiences that other assistant principals receive from their principals should be explored to include a larger sample size and incorporating multiple school levels (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school). Additionally, it would be beneficial to compare the emergent themes from this study to a future study to determine if there are similarities in the mentoring experiences other assistant principals receive from their principals. The correlation between the emergent themes in this study compared to a new study would

provide more trustworthy evidence on the influence of developing the leadership of assistant principals through mentorship.

Assistant Principal Professional Development

This study focused on the mentorship given to elementary assistant principals from their elementary principals within a particular school setting. It would be beneficial to explore how school districts provide assistant principals with ongoing professional development opportunities from a district level, coupled with mentorship to expand their leadership development. Researching the ways that school districts provide leadership development opportunities for assistant principals could provide additional context in the ways that these leaders are provided with multiple leadership perspectives that enhance their leadership preparation for a more advanced leadership role.

Principal Mentoring Professional Development

It would be advantageous to examine how principals are provided with leadership tools to support how they develop the leadership of their assistant principals. As reiterated throughout research, the role of the principal is a significant factor in the ultimate success of a school community (Viadero, 2009). To this end, researching the opportunities and supports provided to principals that help them to identify the best practices for developing and cultivating their school leadership team members can serve useful as a future research study in the area of educational leadership.

Each suggestion for future research may unveil new data that improves the way in which mentoring is provided to school leaders within school districts. This study only analyzed "superficially" the different ways that mentorship has influenced the leadership development of

an elementary assistant principal from their elementary principal. Thus, expanding future research to elicit other perspectives about and of mentorship can potentially provide school leaders and school districts with newer perspectives for how to better develop their internal leadership pipelines.

Researcher Assumptions

Conducting this study provided insight into a few assumptions that the researcher held. At the outset of this study, a vignette was shared in chapter three that chronicled my own leadership experience as an assistant principal. One assumption held was that every elementary assistant principal experienced the same type of leadership development from their principals. During this study, an understanding began to develop that an assistant principal's role is isolated, and your frame of reference derives from your individual experience. This awareness brought about an understanding of the experiences and leadership development that each elementary assistant principal narrated through their lived experiences.

As the interviews continued, they caused a deep reflection on insights that the participant's shared to intrinsically reconcile if any of these experiences mirrored that of the researcher. A poignant sentiment expressed by Principal Luck resonated: "It is important for him to establish his leadership legs" stuck with the researcher throughout the duration of this study. This led to a comparison of previous experiences where I was not afforded this opportunity, and subsequently, I believed that every principal shared a closed off approach to leadership when it came to interacting with their assistant principal. After this interview, an awareness of what is meant by an individual's conception of an experience developed. Through this study, each assistant principal provided the researcher an opportunity to learn more about how others

experience leadership but to also reconcile how the researcher's leadership experience was unique to the context of leadership and school environment.

Conclusion

The research question used to guide this study was answered by the descriptions of the experiences and the themes that emerged from the participants who shared their lived experiences of mentorship. This study can be further expanded through the suggestions provided for future research to explore the benefits that mentorship has on developing school leaders, particularly an assistant principal. Moreover, this study has been able to contribute to the extant body of literature on identifying the ways in which assistant principals have experienced mentorship as a form of leadership development that prepares them for a principal's role. As research has continually reverberated, the role of the assistant principal is one encountered with complexity and a level of dubitable responsibilities that undoubtedly raise the question about how these school leaders are prepared for the role of a principal within a school (Glanz, 2004; Gutmore, 2015; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Morgan, 2018; and Kwan, 2009).

To achieve a stronger principal pipeline, it is paramount that school districts and their leaders have a definitive understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and leadership development needed to advance the leadership disposition of an assistant principal that would prepare them for becoming a principal. The emergent themes of assistant principal leadership, principal leadership development, and mentorship perceptions within this study provide an opportunity for districts to begin developing a framework for implementing practices that identify the best ways to utilize mentorship to foster advanced growth for its school leaders. The aspiration for this dissertation

study was to influence the ways that districts look at mentorship and its impact on developing

assistant principals.

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Appendix A

Email Correspondence sent to research participants.

Research Study: An Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Elementary Assistant

Principals Provided by Elementary Principals Within An Urban School District.

IRB-FY-21-76

Appendix

Research Participant Recruitment E-Mail

Dear: ███████████████████████████████

I hope that this email finds you well. My name is Adib Shakir, and I am a doctoral candidate at Kennesaw State University in the Educational Leadership Department. I am kindly requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting entitled "*An Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Elementary Assistant Principals Provided by Elementary Principals Within A Large School District.*" The purpose of this phenomenographical qualitative dissertation study seeks to explore the ways in which elementary assistant principals experience and receive mentoring from their elementary principals that prepare them for the position of a principal.

Participants in this research study are required to be 18 years of age or older, hold a valid Georgia educator certificate, and presently serve in the capacity of an elementary level assistant principal or elementary level principal.

This research study will involve completing basic demographic information and participating in a virtual (Zoom) interview. Moreover, your participation will involve being asked questions about the influence of mentorship in the leadership development provided to elementary level assistant principals. The anticipated time of your participation in the interview portion of this research study is expected to last no longer than 45-60 minutes. Your participation in this research study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this research study at any time for any reason.

The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but this researcher will not identify your direct participation at any time. In fact, to maintain your records' confidentiality, this researcher (Adib Shakir) will assign each research participant a pseudonym to be used in place of their name to ensure confidentiality. All information about this study will be secured electronically on a password-protected desktop stored in a key-locked office on the researcher's premises.

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, at this time, the possible benefits of your participation in this research are improved professional development opportunities and a deeper understanding of the leadership experiences and opportunities that are afforded to elementary level assistant principals. What is more, this research study will fill a gap in the current research literature that acknowledges that a more in-depth approach to the leadership development of assistant principals should be explored. Finally, your participation in this research study will add to the existing body of

research on the role and leadership development of the assistant principal, and the implications of this study could be potentially used as a resource for school districts and school leaders when looking at the professional development needs for assistant principals.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at (202) 246-7248 or send an email to adibshakir3@students.kennesaw.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to Dr. Christine Ziegler, Kennesaw University Board Institutional Review Board, Office of Research 585 Cobb Avenue, Room 3417, MD #0111 Kennesaw, GA 30144 (470) 578-7721, or email to irb@kennesaw.edu.

If interested, please respond back to this email and I will follow-up with you to set a date/time that is convenient to conduct your participant interview. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I hope to hear back from you soon! Please keep this email communication for your records should you decide to participate in this research study.

Sincerely,
Adib Shakir

Appendix B

Participant Informed Consent

<p style="text-align: center;">Participant Consent Form</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">IRB-FY21-76</p>

Title of Research Study: An Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Elementary Assistant

Principals Provided by Elementary Principals Within An Urban School District

Researcher's Contact Information: Adib Shakir, ███████████, ashakir3@students.kennesaw.edu

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Adib Shakir 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

This research study will explore the lived experiences and conceptions that elementary assistant principals have about the mentorship they receive from their elementary principals through the lens of phenomenography (Marton, 1981). Furthermore, this study will only investigate the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals who desire to become a principal one day. This researcher acknowledges that not all assistant principals aspire to become a principal. Therefore, this study will only focus on those elementary assistant principals who express the aspiration to advance their leadership role to the rank of becoming a principal. Moreover, this study will also explore areas related to how assistant principals receive the necessary leadership development that would prepare them to become a principal. Finally, this study will analyze several core areas that affect an assistant principal's growth with a school. Specifically, this study will review the leadership development of assistant principals, the influence of mentorship, and the duties and responsibilities that relegated to an assistant principal.

Explanation of Procedures

If you decide to participate, then as a study participant you will join a study involving research of elementary assistant principals and elementary principals in a southeastern state in the United States. Participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire and partake in a virtual interview to garner your experiences of the mentoring experiences received by your elementary principals that has prepared you for the position to become a principal.
Time Required

45-60 minutes in length

Risks or Discomforts

There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

Benefits

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, at this time, the possible benefits of your participation in the research are improved professional development opportunities and a deeper understanding about the leadership experiences and opportunities that are afforded to elementary assistant principals. Moreover, this research study will fill a gap in the current research literature that acknowledges that a more in-depth approach to the leadership development of assistant principals should be explored. Finally, your participation in this study will help to add to the existing body of research on the role and leadership development of the assistant principal, but implications of this study could be potentially used as a resource for school districts when looking at the professional development needs for assistant principals.

Confidentiality

The results of this participation will be strictly confidential. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researchers will not identify you. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, Adib Shakir, will assign each participant a pseudonym to be used in place of their name to ensure confidentiality. All information pertaining to the study will be secured electronically on a password-protected desktop stored in a key-locked office on the researcher's premises. After three years, all information pertaining to this study will be deleted and the portal hard drive wiped and restored to factory settings. Any copied of information will be stored in a key-locked cabinet in the key-locked office on the researcher's premises for three years. After the three years, the documents will be shredded by the researchers and recycled. Interviews will be audio recorded and saved on the researchers desktop. The audio recordings will be stored in a key-locked cabinet in the researcher's key-locked home office. The tape recordings will be deleted from the audio recording device after three years and the device will be rest to factory settings. When the portable hard drive is erased and restored to factory settings, the electronic storage of the audio recordings will be deleted at such time as well. Communication with the participants will be based on the participant's preference. The participant can choose to communicate with this researcher using a password-protected email account or by phone. The researcher will not use the participant's real name in the dialogue exchanges via email or phone nor save the participants contact in email or phone using their real name. Should documents need to be exchanged using postal services, the researcher will include the participant's real name on the letter but not include the researchers name on the return address. This letter will be delivered directly to the post office by the researchers and the researcher will cover the recipient's name with a post-it note until it is placed in the outgoing mailbox at the post office. The researcher will only contact the participants using their preferred means of communication. Interviews will be scheduled with the individual participants. The interview Zoom/Skype will be mutually agreed upon to preserve participant confidentiality. The researcher will also request that participant inclusion in this study remain confidential throughout the study. The researcher will notify the participant once the study is complete, and their participation is no longer needed.

Inclusion Criteria for Participation

Participants are required to be 18 years of age or older and hold a valid Georgia educator certificate. Furthermore, participants in this research study must meet the additional requirements.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Elementary assistant principals who have expresses a desire to one day become a principal.

- Elementary assistant principal with at least two years' experience serving in your school leadership role.
- Elementary principals who express their desire to build the capacity of their elementary assistant principal(s).

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, KH3417, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-7721.

Appendix C

School District IRB Approval

September 28, 2020

Researcher/Principal Investigator: Adib Shakir
Institution: Kennesaw State University
Study Title: An Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Elementary Assistant Principals Provided by Elementary Principals Within An Urban School District.

Greetings,

Your request to conduct research in ███████████ has been **approved by the** ███████████ Research Screening Committee. This letter grants you permission to recruit ███████████ **Elementary School Principals** and Assistant Principals to participate in virtual semi-structured interviews for the purpose of this research study from **October 1, 2020 to December 15, 2020.**

Study description: "This research study will explore the ways in which elementary assistant principals are prepared through aspects of mentorship form their elementary principals to one day become a principal."

A few things to consider as you plan for your research:

1. This letter of permission does not in any way guarantee approval from the principal or assistant principal of the proposed schools to participate in activities related to this research study.
2. Interference with instruction time and school operations must be kept to a minimum.
3. If you make changes in the implementation of your study, please notify the Office of Research and Evaluation prior to the beginning of your study.
4. Your assurance of maintaining confidentiality of the participants and the selected schools must strictly be followed. Pseudonyms for individuals and schools, as well as references to ███ as "a large urban school system," are required in the title and text of your study before publication or presentation.
5. Please submit a completed copy of the final research study to the Office of Research and Evaluation via email at research_screening@a███████████ . Any paper slated for presentation and/or publication using ███ data must be shared with the Office of Research and Evaluation prior to the date of publication and/or presentation.

███ Research and Evaluation staff are available to answer questions regarding research policies and practices across the District. However, R&E staff will not be able to support recruitment and communication with school staff. Please contact Dr. Monique ███████████ if you need any further assistance.

Sincerely,

Michael A. L. Monts

███████████

Appendix D

Participant Interview Protocol

Research Study: An Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Elementary Assistant Principals Provided by Elementary Principals Within An Urban School District

Online Interview Protocol IRB- FY21-76

Interview #_____

Date:_____

Script:

Greetings,

My name is Adib Shakir, and I am an elementary assistant principal and a graduate student at Kennesaw State University, conducting research for my dissertation study. This research study, entitled "*An Exploration of the Mentoring Experiences of Elementary Assistant Principals Provided by Elementary Principals Within An Urban School District* aims to explore the mentorship experiences that elementary assistant principals receive from their elementary principals that prepare them for the position of a principal. This study further seeks to examine the phenomenon of mentorship, and in what ways mentorship helps to develop the leadership capacity of elementary assistant principals for the role of a principal.

The completion of this interview will take about 60-75 minutes, and your participation is greatly valued. This interview aims to gain a more in-depth understanding of the leadership development afforded to elementary assistant principals by their elementary principals. More specifically, this study will explore the following:

(1) The perceptions that elementary assistant principals and elementary principals have about mentorship.
(2) The role and relationship that mentorship has in the leadership development of an elementary assistant principal; and
(3) How the combination of job responsibilities coupled with mentoring practices prepares an elementary assistant principal for the position of a principal.

I would like your permission to audio record this interview so that I can ensure that I transcribe your responses accurately. All responses are confidential and will be solely used for the purposes of this dissertation study. Further, to ensure confidentiality, all participants will be given pseudonyms. If at any time you wish to withdraw from this interview session, you are free to do so. Are there any questions before we begin this interview?

Personal Characteristics/Demographic Information

(Note: <mark>***Participants would receive the demographic information, questions #1-10, in advance of the virtual interview***</mark>)

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1. What is your gender? Male/Female

2. What do you identify as your ethnicity?
   - White
   - Hispanic/Latino
   - Black or African American
   - Native American/American Indian
   - Asian/Pacific Islander
   - Other

3. Age
   - 25-34 years old
   - 35-44 years old
   - 45-54 years old
   - 55+ years old

4. Years you have served as an elementary assistant principal?
   - 1-3
   - 4-9
   - 10-15
   - 16-20
   - 20+

5. Years you have served as an elementary school principal?
   - 1-3
   - 4-9
   - 10-15
   - 16-20
   - 20+

6. How long have you and your principal worked as a team? (for assistant principal participants only)
   - 1-3 years
   - 4-9 years
   - 10-15 years
   - 16-20 years
   - 20+ years

7. How long have you worked as a team with your elementary assistant principal? (for principal participants only)
   - 1-3 years
   - 4-9 years
   - 10-15 years
   - 16-20 years
   - 20+ years

8. What is your current level of training?
   - Master's Degree – Tier I
   - Educational Specialist – Tier II
   - Doctoral Degree – Ed.D. or Ph.D.

9. What is the current context that best describes your school setting?
   - Urban
   - Suburban
   - Rural

10. What are the demographics of your school setting?
    - American Indian or Native American
    - Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
    - Asian or Asian American
    - Black or African American
    - Hispanic or Latino
    - Non-Hispanic White

11. Do you have a desire to become a principal eventually? (elementary assistant participants only)
    - Yes
    - No
    - Uncertain

12. As a principal, do you have an expressed desire to build the capacity of your elementary assistant principal to one day become a principal? (elementary principal participants only)
    - Yes
    - No
    - Uncertain

Interview Protocol

Research Question:

What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principals' experience mentoring from their elementary principals?

Preparation and Training for the Principalship

1. Describe the extent or how your formal preparation and/or educational leadership training prepared you for the assistant principalship?
2. Based on what you know about the principalship, to what extent did your formal preparation and/or educational leadership training prepare you for the principalship?
3. Describe the ways that you believe your principal has prepared you for the position of a principal?
4. How are you preparing assistant principals to assume the job of a principal? (**principal participants only**)

Responsibilities of the Principalship

5. As an assistant principal, in what ways do you feel your assigned tasks are preparing you for the responsibilities of the principal?
6. As a principal, please describe what you consider when assigning tasks to assistant principals. To what extent do you consider their possible future position as a principal when assigning their tasks? (**principal participant only**)

Mentorship Questions Elementary Principals and Elementary Assistant Principals

7. How would you define mentorship?
8. From your perspective, in what ways does mentorship help cultivate the relationship between an elementary assistant principal and an elementary principal?
9. From your perspective, in what aspects of the principalship have you been mentored?
10. From your perspective, in what aspects of the principalship have you not been mentored?
11. As an elementary assistant principal, please describe how you believe your principal is preparing you for the various responsibilities of a principal through mentorship.
12. As an elementary principal, please describe the mentorship that you received as an assistant principal, and how this experience prepared you for the principalship? (**principal participant only**)
13. Would you describe the ways that you provide mentorship for your assistant principal and the goals of that mentorship? (**principal participant only**)
14. In what ways do you feel that your mentorship provides your elementary assistant principal with the skills necessary for him/her for the responsibilities of a principal? (**principal participant only**)
15. In what ways do you feel that the mentorship you have received from your elementary principal prepared or is preparing you for the responsibilities of a principal? What additional support or knowledge would you have liked to receive from your mentors? (**assistant principal participant only**)

16. What are the mentorship activities a principal should provide their APs as they prepare for the responsibilities of a principal?
17. Overall, how effectively have you been mentored? Please explain.

Thank you all for your time and participation today. Your responses are most appreciated and will be helpful as I begin to explore the preparation elementary assistant principals receive from their elementary principal for the role of a principal.