

## A Formal Administrator Mentoring Program: Perceived Learning Benefits and Insights into Leadership Well-being

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

This study was approved by the OU Office of Human Research Participant Protection and complied with all requirements of its Institutional Review Board.

# A Formal Administrator Mentoring Program: Perceived Learning Benefits and Insights into Leadership Well-being

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate a formal principal mentoring program and report on perceived learning benefits and the well-being of the participants. The study highlights aspects of the mentoring relationship evidenced in the explicit and intentional development of school leaders. The empirical investigation used qualitative-naturalistic inquiry methods. Data were collected primarily through in-depth, focused participant interviews. The findings of this study revealed both the “what” and “how” of perceived benefits within formal mentoring relationships under the direction of a state-wide programmatic initiative. Of particular interest was the role of social learning through reflective activity and the results of occupational well-being. A truthful representation of aspects of mentoring relationships between novice and mentor principals within formal programming provided insights into how novice learning supports their well-being. Implications for the development and retention of principals are considered.

**Keywords:** administrative mentoring, professional learning, principal development, occupational well-being

## Introduction

There is a nationally recognized demand to improve school leadership in the United States, and this demand has become a policy priority for many nations around the world (Pont et al., 2008). Higher education institutions, local school districts, and professional associations continue to make noticeable contributions toward this goal (Childress et al., 2009; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Gates et al., 2019). Even so, there is much work to be done. The quest for improved school leadership forces stakeholders to assess administrator preparation programs and determine whether school leaders are truly prepared when they accept their first administrative position. Improving school leaders also forces us to look at the types of support administrators receive once they obtain a leadership position in a school or district. Regrettably, there is an ongoing lack of systematic, comprehensive support for administrators, particularly as they grapple with their internal state of well-being (Aycock, 2006; Burkhart et al., 2007; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Villani, 2006; Wardlow, 2008).

Accentuating the lack of systemic support for school leaders is the reality of the complex and demanding role of new administrators. New policy mandates, standards, demands for accountability, and the increasing complexity of the job characterize the principalship today, both within the United State and globally (Bodger, 2011; Chan et al., 2019). To assist new school administrators in addressing the demands and challenges they face, educators and policymakers must consider providing them with the information and support necessary to be successful in their new role. Browne-Ferrigo and Muth (2006) suggest that novice principals, to grow in their practice, require professional development based on practice expectations through mentoring, peer sharing, critique, and systematic induction. Mentoring for novice administrators may be helpful in acquiring practical competencies related to leadership practice (Mohn & Machell, 2005) as well as supporting their sense of well-being and development (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018).

In what is hopefully a trend toward filling the gap in professional development for administrators, the practice of cultivating mentoring relationships between school administrators is increasing in popularity across the nation (Daresh & Playko, 1989; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019). The Wallace Foundation (2007) reports that “roughly half of the nation’s states have now adopted mentoring requirements for new principals—a striking turnabout considering how rare acceptance of or funding for such mentoring was prior to 2000” (p. 3). And most recently, the RAND Corporation along with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of efforts undertaken by the Wallace Foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI) with the goal of supporting comprehensive school leadership improvement at scale. Part of the initiative involved principals receiving targeted mentoring support with notable outcomes in retention, work satisfaction, and positive changes in student achievement (Gates et al., 2019).

As educators who know how critical it is to have strong leadership in schools, the researchers believe it is important to seek out, evaluate, and implement the most effective professional development models designed to achieve this goal. Mentoring is a form of professional development with great potential, as evidenced by increasing support across the United States (Clayton et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2011).

This phenomenological-like qualitative study contributes to the body of principal mentoring research by building knowledge and understanding about the perceived benefits novice, newly-incumbent school administrators experience, particularly as those experiences are made available through a U.S. state-initiated program designed to frame and support the mentoring relationship. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate a formal principal mentoring program and report on perceived learning benefits and the well-being of the participants. Our central research question was as follows: What meaning making is native to participants in a formal mentoring program, and how does this contribute to the well-being of novice principals?

### **Theoretical Framing: Adult Learning through Social Activity**

Mentoring, as a form of professional learning for novice school administrators, calls on the social-constructivist theory of adult learning. Thus, it emphasizes experiential learning and knowledge as commonly established through inquiry, observation, experience, participation, and practice (Clark, 2001; Dewey, 1933; Engestrom, 1994; Engestrom, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Loughran, 2003; Orland-Barak, 2010; Tillema, 2005).

Social constructivism suggests that engaging in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks is a dialogic process of making meaning, in which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members (Driver et al., 1994). Attending to experience as a core component of professional learning for adults can be traced back to John Dewey, who developed the concept of experiential growth (Dewey, 1933; Knowles, 1978).

Mentoring situates itself within a model of adult learning that emphasizes learning as self-directed, experiential, and involving critical reflection by individuals who are motivated and ready to learn (Brookfield, 1996; Huang, 2002; Knowles et al., 2005). The construction of professional knowledge is initiated and sustained through ongoing, progressive discourse among colleagues as they interpret work-related situations (Edwards et al., 2002; Orland-Barak, 2010). This kind of learning is grounded in a defined historical-cultural social activity (Allen et al., 2011) that is interactive, collaborative, authentic, and learner-centered. Activity and experiences, therefore, construct meaningful knowledge in situ (Huang, 2002).

Through this learning experience, one can hypothesize, newly officed principals will garner “protective factors” as they engage in work roles that present “ever-changing and conflicting professional demands, work-related stress, anxiety, burnout, and increasing work-life imbalance” (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019, p. 229). Formal mentoring has the potential to support principals in their work and, as a corollary, assist them in attending to their well-being (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). According to Kutsyuruba and Godden (2019, p. 229), social and emotional well-being includes

*both hedonic aspects of feeling good (positive emotions) and more eudemonic (conducive to happiness) aspects of living well that entail experiences of positive relationships, meaningfulness in life and work, senses of mastery and personal growth, autonomy, and achievement (Keyes, 2002, 2003; Ryan et al., 2008; Seligman, 2011).*

## Literature

Mentoring as a form of professional development is supported by much of what is currently known about how individuals learn, including the socially constructed nature of learning and the importance of experiential, situated learning experiences (Kerka, 2002; McNeven et al., 2020). Mentoring is almost universally seen as a potent mechanism to help new administrators “get their sea legs” in a fast-changing, complicated system (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2007, p. 6) as well as an effective tool for supporting principals at different developmental stages of their administrative careers (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Bakiloglu et al., 2010; Chapman, 2005; Smith & Arseneault, 2014). Providing support for beginning leaders who are making the transition into administration can promote growth beyond survival (Gates et al., 2019).

Emerging research increasingly appears to support administrator mentoring programs (Della Sala et al., 2013; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). In their research of a regional program created to support new administrators in southeast Ohio, Howley et al. (2002) found that among new school leaders who were asked to complete a portfolio based on the former Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, approximately 70% of participants ranked mentors as the most crucial component of the program. Garza’s (2020) more recent research emphasizes the importance of formal mentoring by reporting on the possibilities for deep critical reflection toward collective consciousness leading to “relationships of authenticity, equity, and reciprocity” (p. 459).

Mentoring research also gives us insight into benefits mentees gain in a variety of ways, particularly by learning through the leadership mentoring experience (Thessin et al., 2020). In a survey of 92 Massachusetts elementary principals that explored practitioners' perceptions of the benefits of principal mentoring programs, Rodriguez (2006) found that 90% of novice principals agreed that mentoring aided them in understanding the roles and responsibilities of their position, 98% of novice principals agreed that managerial support was a benefit of mentoring, 67% of novice principals agreed that mentors help a mentee learn the culture of the school, 86% of mentored principals agreed that mentoring can help a novice principal become a more effective instructional leader, and 87% of novice principals agreed that mentoring can help alleviate feelings of anxiety.

Upon completing a structural analysis of more than 300 research-based articles on mentoring, Ehrich et al. (2004) found that mentoring has enormous potential to bring about learning, personal growth, and development for professionals. The most commonly cited positive outcome for mentees was related to support, empathy, encouragement, counseling, and friendship. In a qualitative multiple case study of principal support and induction practices, Bodger (2011) found that novice administrators welcomed the assistance they received from mentors. Specifically, mentees reported that their mentoring relationships supported them in gaining confidence and providing opportunities to vent frustrations or obtain feedback. Furthermore, participants reported reduced stress, feeling less isolated and more effective in their jobs. More recently, Huffman (2017) indicated that through the mentoring experience, principal mentees accrued new leadership competencies, such as interpersonal collaboration, school scheduling, personnel evaluation, delegation, and designing professional learning.

Mentors become critical partners in working toward the success of new administrators, and particular characteristics and qualities of mentors are important. Some time ago, Alsbury and Hackman (2006) identified a number of important mentor qualities, including active listening and the ability to provide different perspectives, an availability to provide generic assistance throughout the mentoring process, and providing an entrée to other administrators in establishing a supportive network of peers. More recently, Schechter (2014) reported that "respect, admiration, openness, honesty, trust, and sincerity [are] the essential components needed to make a mentoring process successful" (p. 58). Of course, these qualities are reciprocal, desired by both parties (see Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Spiro et al., 2007). Other valued attributes of ideal mentors include being equipped as skilled communicators, active listeners, and analytical problem solvers, while also being generous with their feedback and possessing negotiation skills (NAESP, 2003; see also Rehrig, 1996).

Research conducted by Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) and Chapman (2005) supports the idea that experienced administrators who mentor novice administrators gain significant benefits from participating in a reciprocal mentoring relationship. More recent research supports this earlier claim; particularly, Bickmore and Davenport (2019) and Schechter (2014) report that mentors have the opportunity for professional growth through sustained practice discourses that may lead to transformative learning experiences within their own work. Taking on the role of mentor can breathe life into the career of a long-time educator. As with mentees, mentors experience opportunities for reflection on their own behavior, attitudes, and values, which may serve to strengthen leadership ability. Mentoring relationships may also reduce mentors' feelings of isolation by promoting the feeling of being a member of a productive and cohesive team (Playko, 1995).

On the whole, most empirical literature on new principal mentoring characterizes positive outcomes of intentional support and accentuates a change-oriented school improvement agenda (Sciarappa & Mason, 2014), yet mentoring programs can fall short of their potential (Douglas, 1997; Kilburg, 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2007). Existing state- and district-level programs can experience drawbacks for the organization, mentor, and mentee, with common symptoms including difficulties in coordinating a program with other initiatives, lack of skills needed for the mentoring role, and overdependence on the relationship with the mentor, respectively. Even considering these reported challenges, what currently is being provided to novice principals is not a wasted endeavor. Common program shortcomings, though, can limit the good that mentoring accomplishes.

## Methods

As the use of mentoring relationships as a type of professional support for new principals gains popularity, more research is needed to document the perceived outcomes that principals identify regarding their involvement in mentoring programs. Specifically, what are the perceived benefits to being involved in an administrator mentoring program, and how do these benefits support the well-being of school administrators?

This study focused on seven individuals who met participant criteria of being a public school administrator with previous or current participation in the same formal mentoring program. Participants were identified through outreach to the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Program (AMP) and selected based on their willingness to participate in an in-depth interview process. Of the seven participants who agreed to take part in the study, four were mentees, and three were mentors (veteran principals); four were women, and three were men. They were located in rural, suburban, and urban settings throughout the program's state-wide reach.

Each participant served as a primary source and either was actively engaged or had recently completed the AMP during the 2014 academic year. AMP is a two-year mentoring program for new administrators sponsored by the Missouri Partnership for Mentoring School Leaders (MPMSL), which meets an April 2005 Missouri certification rule requiring two years of district-sponsored mentoring for the renewal of administrator certificates for principals, special education directors, and career education leaders (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The program provides a minimum of 10 hours per year of one-to-one mentor services and support to newly certified school leaders to assist them in successfully transitioning from preparation to practice (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Mentors attend a training session and, after being matched with a mentee, consistently meet with the new school leader on site for planned observations, discussion, and feedback. Mentors also provide continual availability by phone and e-mail for questions and consultation. After conducting extended interviews with participants and analyzing recorded transcripts, the researchers portrayed their experiences in a formal mentoring program through identified themes related to the central inquiry point of the study.

The focus of this research was not on making predictions, making generalizations to a larger population, or finding causal inference, all tenets of quantitative research. Rather, we sought an understanding of the benefits key educators experienced within the context of mentoring relationships through obtaining in-depth, detailed, thick descriptions of expert and novice experiences and perspectives. For this purpose, empirical investigation using a phenomenological-like qualitative approach was best suited to our study. Understanding and appreciating the viability of the generic inductive qualitative model (GIQM) (Hood, 2007;

Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Maxwell, 2005), we employed a modified phenomenological perspective for examining the mentoring relationship.

Data were collected primarily through in-depth, focused participant interviews. Additionally, the researchers reviewed Missouri AMP documents to capture the nature and background of the state initiative. As willing participants, administrators shared their experiences of being school principals involved in mentoring relationships. To address the issues of authenticity, transferability, and replicability, we gave careful consideration to case-rich purposeful sampling, data collection through interview procedures, management of data, and data analysis.

Preliminary data analysis with GIQM began with a careful reading of the interview texts, relevant Missouri Administrator Mentoring Program documents, and researcher comments and ideas. Organizing text in this manner allowed for listing coded statements of meaning for participants and grouping these statements into meaning units that constituted a theme or conceptual category. The coding process consisted of searching for emergent themes or patterns, such as conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, and feelings, to find phenomenological patterns that stood out in the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Some coding examples included role(s), goal(s), growth, design, communication, learning intentional, learning unintentional, reflection, leading, and benefits. Throughout the data analysis, the researchers compared emerging themes and coding categories to determine whether there were common language threads or meanings embedded in participant records.

After the researchers coded and themed all data, a cross-participant analysis of the seven individual cases identified processes and outcomes that were similar and dissimilar to understand how experiences were qualified by local conditions and settings and, thus, to develop a more sophisticated description and more powerful explanation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within the cross-participant analysis, the differences and similarities across the mentee and mentor administrator participants were explored. A phenomenological textural description emerged from thematically organized meaning units. The researchers then used the textural description in constructing a composite portrait of the mentoring experience.

### **Analysis and Findings**

Mentoring is a collaborative form of professional development rooted in a learning-focused relationship. This specialized kind of relationship provides a network of resources while helping new administrators instruct their craft, develop the professionalism they need, and increase the collegiality that will advance and improve teacher practice. It is a relationship in which mentors are sometimes there to listen and provide support, while at other times, they may interact as coaches or consultants, providing mentees with exemplary models of the profession. As we analyzed the data, we identified several emergent themes that related closely to the inquiry points of the study. From our review of the data, we developed the following emergent themes related to perceived learning: communication, time, leadership, and problem solving involving policy and procedure.

#### **Perceived Learning of Mentees: Relational Communication**

Communicating effectively with colleagues is of equal importance for novice administrators. The way in which an administrator communicates with colleagues is a significant factor in setting the tone and developing the culture at a school or in a district. Learning how to “work with people” was an important lesson for her mentee, one participant mentor recalled. In fact,



she believed her mentee made significant growth in this area. “Working with people” means leaders in education often must have challenging conversations with their colleagues. Developing expertise and building a level of comfort involves practice and receiving guidance from more experienced administrators.

The success of a school or a district depends on a strong foundation of positive relationships with all stakeholders. Building these relationships can sometimes be a challenge for novice administrators. Learning to communicate becomes central to mentee development. One participant described her learning in this way: “I’ve learned about how important communication is and however small the incident might be...”

Many of the participants identified the ability to communicate effectively to develop important collaborative partnerships with colleagues, parents, and community members as learning that occurred both through ongoing dialogue between mentors and mentees and through authentic experiences facilitated within the context of the mentoring relationship.

### **Perceived Learning of Mentees: Time Management**

When making the transition from teacher to administrator, novices who participated in the study often struggled with anticipating their new responsibilities and planning ahead to accomplish newly acquired tasks. Because of the demands of the position, novice administrators often felt there was never enough time to accomplish everything that had to be accomplished. They often felt overwhelmed. Demands like handling faculty and staff issues, custodial issues, cafeteria duty, and student discipline consumed much of the day. This left tasks like required paperwork, curriculum planning, and instructional leadership for after school, which began to cut into personal time.

Many administrators expressed frustration at having to choose between staying at school to catch up on tasks and going home to spend time with family. One mentee recalled, “For me, one of the biggest things that I learned was prioritizing and making sure that I remained organized and setting up timelines to get things done, and creating action plans for things that need to be addressed.” According to participants, balancing the tasks required of an administrator with family time and personal care continued to be a challenge.

Many administrators reported that they learned how to be better time managers as a result of participating in discussions and observations regarding effective time management practices. Discussion, implementing an idea, and then further discussion to debrief how the implementation went was a practical way to construct new knowledge. Learning how to organize, prioritize, and create action plans as ways to “work smarter, not harder” were areas of focus that many administrators reported to have helped them learn to be better time managers, leading them to greater job efficiency. Learning how to compartmentalize work and home or personal life helped with finding balance, which in turn contributed to an improvement in overall mental health.

### **Perceived Learning of Mentees: Leadership**

All administrators in this study believed that participants in mentoring programs learn about the demands of their job and how to be better leaders. Much of this learning happened as the result of critical reflection on their day-to-day actions and experiences. Many described developing an increased repertoire of actions as a leader. Understanding what it means to be an administrator, along with the tasks and responsibilities that one must accomplish, is an

important part of role socialization for new administrators as they step into formal leadership positions. One mentee described her learning about leadership this way:

*[Learning] just the basic day-to-day dealing with situations with teachers. Determining, how I can say this, determining...well, choosing my battles. Not being so picky about certain things. Learning to live with certain things as long as they were ethically and morally ok and not always having it to be done my way...open to feedback from teachers.*

Several participants discussed the specific leadership skills they learned about, such as motivating staff and being in the classroom. Much of the learning that occurred was experiential, meaning it happened as participants worked through real-life situations on a day-to-day basis. Other learning occurred through dialogue about day-to-day experiences.

### **Perceived Learning of Mentees: Situational Problem Solving**

Administrators are faced with a multitude of situations on a daily basis for which they must decide the “best” course of action. As mentors support administrators through mentoring in context, mentees build their ability to address their day-to-day challenges. During conversations, a mentee might ask questions like, “How do I handle this?” or “What would you do in this situation?” All participants noted the learning that happened regarding various everyday situations, such as discipline, grading, or dress code issues. One mentee affirmatively shared that she and her mentor discussed “lots of scenarios...what ifs...how to handle different situations,” especially, “how to handle difficult situations.”

Many administrators reported learning about specific policies and procedures within the context of their mentoring relationship—that is, through talking rather than reading. They expressed the belief that the institutional support was very beneficial in helping them complete day-to-day tasks, such as asking the simple question, “Whom do I contact?” Budgeting and finance issues and the legal ramifications of personnel issues were also topics in which participants believed learning occurred.

### **Benefits of Mentoring as Perceived by Mentees and Mentors**

Several emergent themes appeared that supplemented participants’ experiences and descriptions of their learning within the formal mentoring process. These supplemental insights focused on how the mentoring relationship supported novices’ well-being alongside their learning of their job as novices. These themes included meaningful professional relationship, catalyst for professional learning, framework for support, and vehicle for self-reflection.

#### ***Meaningful Professional Relationship***

Mentoring programs provide the foundation for creating learning-focused relationships. Life as an administrator is often a rocky road. Establishing a meaningful, learning-focused relationship helps administrators navigate the bumps, turns, and potholes in the road. The mentoring relationship is intended to provide support, to produce growth and development, and to increase expertise in a novice’s instructional leadership practice. To produce the desired results of this specialized relationship, a variety of interactions must occur within the relationship. The mentor’s role as a growth agent is key in accomplishing desired outcomes. Trust and confidentiality are also key.

In many schools and districts, novice administrators do not feel comfortable addressing questions to their immediate supervisors for fear of being perceived as not knowing how to do their jobs (Northfield, 2017). A relationship in which administrators feel psychologically safe is a critical component in creating an environment that allows them to express their uncertainty, ask questions, and think aloud. Unanimously, the study participants believed the mentoring relationship produced a safe relational environment in which they could freely ask questions and seek advice.

Most participants ranked developing mentoring relationships as important and believed that developing a relationship allows for opportunities to sit and converse about any issues that arise. Part of building that relationship is respecting the vulnerability of the mentee and the cultivating the necessary confidence. Developing a relationship enables the mentor and mentee to communicate openly and honestly. It allows for the mentor to give helpful suggestions and for the mentee to accept those suggestions rather than interpreting them as judgment from the mentor.

Following from this relational safety between mentor and mentee, one participant explained that she learned “how to build relationships with teachers, with administration, and with parents and the community as a whole.” A mentor agreed with this view, stating that she worked with her mentee on how to develop communication skills to better “partner and collaborate” with colleagues.

### ***Catalyst for Professional Learning***

This category is different from the perceived learning mentees identified as described above. All participants identified the professional learning that takes place within a mentoring relationship as a significant benefit of participating in a mentoring program. Mentors noted that they supported mentees in learning how to become instructional leaders, how to manage time, how to see the big picture, and how to anticipate what was coming down the road. As many participants pointed out, new administrators face a very real, steep learning curve. This view was held from both sides of the mentoring relationship.

Constant dialogue focused on daily occurrences is a good way to facilitate learning in practice. This accountable talk is a feature of social constructivism, implying that people do not learn unless they acquire cultural tools through discourse (Driver et al., 1994; Vgotsky, 1978). Many participants talked about the benefit of the relationship as a focused learning opportunity and a common learning experience. Within the context of mentoring, fair and credible feedback that is supportively formative rather than narrowly summative can facilitate powerful learning and a sense of meaningful mastery and growth (White, 2019).

Novice administrators noted that having the opportunity to view situations through the eyes of another, more experienced, administrator was a valuable experience. One novice administrator discussed how learning to manage time more effectively helped her

*to really balance, how to balance everything. And I mean, I don't think there is a magic key to that, but just knowing that other people can do it...and some of the systems they had in place to do it I think were very helpful.*

Another recalled that her mentor “helped with compartmentalizing work and home and being okay with walking away at certain points with what’s going on at work.” This administrator felt that learning through supportive dialogue with her mentor to better manage her time really helped with her overall mental health.

This type of social learning occurs as vicarious learning: not necessarily by observing the mentor but by the mentor explaining their interpretations of situations and events and the mentee coming to understand another point of view and likely adopting the mentor's reality. More than one participant validated the benefit of learning from another's viewpoint, discussing how important it was to get a different perspective. For instance, one mentee shared, "A mentor allows you to look...from another person's point of view or through their eyes. It allows you to get feedback. It gives you the opportunity to learn from that person."

Across the board, all participants recommended participation in a mentoring program as a way to become better administrators while also improving their lives and well-being. Mentors in the study agreed that the mentoring relationship served as a developmental learning experience for all involved.

### ***Framework for Support***

Administrators in their early years should never be left alone to succeed or fail, but this is often the reality, causing many new administrators to leave the field in a few short years (Militello et al., 2009; Reames et al., 2014). New administrators often lack confidence and are their own worst critics. They may become frustrated because there is so much to learn, and they cannot learn it fast enough. They may become overwhelmed with the volume of tasks there are to accomplish. Stress can overtake the life of an administrator. Mentoring novice administrators through these early years provides a vital resource and support system. Mentoring can provide a support system that keeps principals in the field while curtailing the system's hiring and attrition costs.

Among the many benefits of participating in a mentoring relationship, all participants identified "support." Administrators involved in the study across the board reported a feeling of being supported. This feeling of support evolved from consistently having someone to answer their questions to having someone with whom to talk through situations. Mentees see the relationship as beneficial because they are working with a veteran who understands the heavy demands of being an administrator.

One component of feeling supported is the honesty and trust level built between a mentor and mentee. Feeling free to ask questions in a nonjudgmental relationship is important to novice administrators. Discussion becomes more important than accumulating ready-made answers. This is indicative of both the trust and the vulnerability associated with change. One participant shared that her mentoring relationship helped her know "how to deal with change" and how to "[help] teachers and parents deal with change."

Being part of a community and not feeling alone is important for a new administrator. Unanimously, participants believed the mentoring relationship produced a safe relational environment. This often helps a new administrator feel like their load has been lightened or some of the pressure has been taken off them, possibly because they have developed personal relationships and a common sense of identity as they have become a member of a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). As a member of a community of practice, they deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis. Community membership helps them feel no longer isolated.

### ***Vehicle for Self-Reflection***

Experience is necessary, but reflection is the true teacher. One of the most powerful strategies mentors can model is how to reflect. Similarly, one of the most important skills administrators can learn is how to reflect on their practice, stepping outside themselves to carefully examine

themselves. This aspect of self-enhancing insight is illustrated by one participant's reflection about the possibilities available to him through continuous improvement:

*...because when you walk into a new job, especially an administration job, you're overwhelmed, and you don't know what you don't know. So, I think doing it for a couple of years, by the second year you're starting to figure out what you don't know. You can ask the right questions and you can continue to refine your skills.*

Most of the study participants identified reflection within the mentoring relationship as a clear benefit. A mentee indicated appreciation for structured reflection time that allowed him "to [look] back and think things through."

Participants identified regular debriefings that promoted critical reflection as beneficial. Reflection was typically connected to topics that were chosen by the participant and was facilitated through questioning and discussion. The metacognition that occurred during the process of reflecting promoted professional learning.

### ***Drawbacks: Time and Instrumentation***

Participants in Missouri's AMP were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences. However, often, new administrators feel there is never enough time in the day to accomplish everything that is to be done. This feeling was confirmed in this study. Making time to meet in an ongoing mentoring relationship became an obstacle for some participants and required an intentional commitment to continually engage. Also, ironically, the program lacked an instrumentation to measure mentee growth. With the heightened emphasis on data-informed decision making in many aspects of the principal's work, participants noted this glaring program omission.

## **Phenomenological Dimensions of Learning and Well-Being within Administrator Mentoring**

What follows is a textural description presenting the learning experiences of administrators participating in the mentoring program. The description provides a view of what happened regarding the phenomenon of learning for participants.

Immersed in the reality of becoming new administrators, at some point, participants experienced a growing feeling that there was much about their new role that was unknown to them. This experience brought about other feelings, including not only excitement about reaching a new goal but also apprehension, self-doubt, and uncertainty about impending and unknown responsibilities in their future. Almost immediately, participants felt a separation from their usual peers, other teachers, and began to experience the feelings of isolation often reported by school administrators (Bodger, 2011; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006).

Coupled with a state mandate that new administrators participate in a mentoring experience and recognition of the need for professional support in their new role as a school leader, participants intentionally sought out a forum for learning. The experience of learning in the initial period of being a new administrator brought about feelings of relief. Each new bit of information assimilated into their working schema meant they had gained knowledge that would help them be successful in their journey as a school leader. Gaining new knowledge provided opportunities for participants to refine, review, and build on new learning. However, gaining new knowledge also brought about feelings of being overwhelmed. Participants experienced the realization that there was much more learning needed, but they did not necessarily know exactly what they needed to learn. They had the clear sense of not knowing

what they did not know. Gaining knowledge in one area could trigger a panicky realization of the knowledge they did not possess. Taking in large amounts of new knowledge day after day consumed participants, leaving them wondering how they would learn everything necessary. Sometimes, they felt their brains were so overflowing with new information that they could not take in any more new knowledge. Weighing heavily on their minds was the fear of not knowing something and making a mistake.

As learning continued, participants experienced an intermittent sense of accomplishment as they used their new-found knowledge to tackle everyday situations. They experienced a sense of accomplishment when they retrieved new knowledge to help them maneuver through a situation or make a decision. At the same time, they continued to recognize gaps in their knowledge. Specific situations would shine a spotlight on their need to continue learning while also motivating them to do so.

As participants became more knowledgeable about their new administrative roles and responsibilities, they had more experiences of using their new knowledge in a practical way. Learning was still occurring on a regular basis, although new learning experiences tended to address more unique situations rather than those that occurred on an ongoing basis. Throughout the mentoring relationship, learning sometimes happened quickly and sometimes was a slow process, requiring purposeful attention and focus.

With the above textural description in mind, we render a composite structural description below. This description portrays how participants experienced the phenomenon. The composite structural description focuses on the aspects of the experience that allow for a description of the general experience by all rather than the details of the experience as reported specifically by each participant (Giorgi, 1985). The integration of experiences from each individual in this study provides a description of how learning occurred and to what ends.

Gaining new knowledge to be successful as a school administrator was a high priority for all participants. Forming a relationship with a mentor was a means to an end or, in other words, a vehicle to transport them to higher levels of knowledge and experiences of well-being. Dialogue between mentors and mentees within the context of the mentoring relationship served as a catalyst for learning. At times, the discussion focused on immediate needs based on what was happening in participants' professional or personal lives. At other times, the discussion turned to future needs, looking ahead to what was coming down the pike.

Discussion between mentors and mentees often led to reflection. Sometimes, this reflection was focused and purposeful, and at other times, it was related to whatever issue was most urgent or on the forefront of participants' minds. For mentees, reflection often happened alone in the quiet of their office at the end of the day. This reflective experience often turned into a discussion between mentor and mentee through a phone call or face-to-face meeting. Learning through the eyes of another emerged from reflective discussions. Dialogue and reflection were closely intertwined as participants constructed new knowledge.

Participants experienced learning as they had the opportunity to interact and observe each other in the context of their role as administrator. Assimilating new knowledge from the words and actions of another administrator proved powerful and impactful. A follow-up discussion in which reflective interaction occurred further embedded new knowledge in participants' expanding schemas.

The belief that an essence exists within the lived experiences of people who have progressed through a similar situation is the foundation for creating a composite portrait of a phenomenon. Even as individual participants' experiences vary in relation to learning as a phenomenon, when considered together, their experiences reveal a common reality. Below, we blend textural and structural descriptions into a final composite portrait of this learning experience.

All participants experienced the common phenomenon of gaining new knowledge and dispositions through learning, and that learning contributed to their overall well-being. Although a state-mandated mentoring experience was imminent, all participants articulated a willingness and desire to enter into the experience for professional growth and support. Working through the transition from the classroom to an administrative role created excitement, fear, and apprehension of the unknown but also served as a platform for learning. Even though participants had other resources at their disposal, the formation of the mentoring relationship facilitated positive interactions with other individuals who had walked in their shoes. The participants were intent on learning, knowing that new knowledge and outlook would ease their transition to their new role.

As participants continued through their mentoring experience, learning became a source of relief while simultaneously generating new anxieties about the large knowledge gaps that still existed. Discussions between mentee and mentor became invaluable avenues for learning. Whether discussions happened in person, over the phone, or through e-mail, they facilitated exchanges of ideas and perspectives, and they promoted learning among participants. Participants interacted with and observed each other, which also led to discussion and recursive reflection. Reflection occurred often, sometimes within the context of a discussion and at other times in the solitude of individuals' own experiences. As a tool for learning, reflective practice (Schön, 1983) proved to be powerful for all participants. With learning came the attenuation of stress and isolation through community support, the engendering of confidence through mentor empathy, and the realization of reflective balance for personal and family life.

## **Discussion**

Mentoring has evolved as a form of professional development and learning for new school administrators as one way to fill in the gaps left by administrator preparation programs as well as offer support in their new positions (Clayton et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2011). However, do administrators who participate in mentoring programs gain new knowledge and skills to promote their success and impact their well-being?

Taken together, the findings of this study reveal both the "what" and "how" of learning within formal mentoring relationships under the direction of a statewide programmatic initiative. Several themes related to perceived learning emerged from participants' recollections of their mentoring experiences. Participants reported that mentees learned to communicate more effectively with colleagues, parents, and community members. This was of high importance to all participants and had been identified as an area of difficulty for mentees. Managing time more effectively was also identified as a learning outcome. Mentees developed a better understanding of their new role as an administrator and believed they learned to be better leaders. Participants also reported learning situational problem solving involving policy and procedure.

Throughout the mentoring process, ongoing, supportive dialogue between the mentor and mentee established a level of trust, which laid the foundation for a meaningful learning experience. Participants experienced much of the learning as the result of mentees' critical reflection regarding day-to-day actions and experiences. Job-embedded, authentic, and interactive learning experiences, such as teacher observations or participating in classroom walkthroughs together, were instrumental in developing novice administrators' new knowledge and skills. Often, new learning happened as a result of conversations between mentees and mentors in which mentors shared ideas, interpretations of situations, and best practices. Mentees would then work to implement a strategy or practice and follow up with their mentor with continued reflective discussion.

Participants identified what they believed were benefits of being involved in a mentoring program. Most of them perceived the mentoring relationship as a meaningful professional relationship, one built on trust. All mentees and mentors in the study indicated that professional learning was a significant benefit of their involvement in the program. They were unanimous in their belief that a mentoring relationship served as a catalyst for professional learning, and they recommended participation in a mentoring program. Mentees reported feeling very supported by their mentors and regarded the mentoring relationship as providing a framework for support and general well-being. Finally, most of the study participants discussed the mentoring relationship as a vehicle for self-reflection.

Overwhelmingly, participants believed their experience in a mentoring program was a positive one that resulted in significant professional learning. They noted only two drawbacks. The first was the lack of an instrument for measuring growth in the program. Although participants perceived that significant learning occurred, there was no way to gather this relevant data. Second, some participants identified a lack of time as a drawback. With so many demands on administrators, finding time to meet sometimes became an obstacle, especially when mentoring was just another layer of work on top of an already compacted workday. These challenges are evidenced in existing literature (Douglas, 1997; Kilburg, 2007; The Wallace Foundation, 2007).

### **Summary of Study Findings**

From the findings of this study, the development of communication skills emerged as an important area of learning and growth. All of the participants indicated that learning how to communicate more effectively was a direct outcome of their mentoring relationships. Participants also clearly identified time management as an area in which learning occurred. By this, participants meant that they believed they learned how to prioritize and create action plans to accomplish the many tasks on their lists each day. Better time management also promoted a balance between work and commitments at home, therefore improving overall mental health.

The participants expressed a certain belief that they learned how to be better leaders. Role socialization was an important component in their growth as new school leaders. This meant, first, gaining a true understanding of what it means to be an administrator. It included learning how to improve instructional leadership skills and how best to support teachers and their professional growth. It involved learning about different leadership styles and finding the right fit, and it encompassed how to facilitate meaningful change.

The participants' experiences indicated that they learned how to be better problem solvers, especially in instances involving policy and procedure. There was a steep learning curve when



making everyday decisions. Participants reported learning about how to handle issues like student behavior, discipline, and dress code. They also learned about how to handle issues with teachers, such as student grading practices and teacher dismissal. All participants reported learning how to solve problems related to policies and procedures as a direct result of their mentoring relationships. These findings connect to the importance of viewing the learning and well-being of novice principals through constructivist, social activity perspectives.

As participants reflected on their experiences, they expressed several benefits of participating in a formal mentoring program. Establishing a meaningful professional relationship was an important benefit. All participants believed the mentoring relationship facilitated significant learning, and this was a huge payoff for both mentors and mentees. They highly valued the opportunity to learn from the experience of a seasoned veteran and to view situations through the eyes of another. Mentees and mentors reported that they learned how to communicate more effectively and manage their time better. Mentees also believed they increased their leadership and problem-solving skills. As a result, all participants recommended participation in such a relationship, whether formal or informal.

Providing a framework for support was another benefit all participants identified. Having a sounding board, someone off whom to bounce ideas, was important to novice administrators, and they felt their mentoring relationships provided this. The fact that their sounding board was someone who had walked “in the same shoes” made the support and feedback authentic, empathetic, and more meaningful.

Reflection is an important practice that facilitates professional growth as new leaders begin to maneuver through duties and responsibilities (Hall, 2008; Trotter, 2006). Participants articulated regular opportunities for reflection as a meaningful benefit within the mentoring relationship. This happened mainly through conversations between mentees and mentors. Some expressed appreciation for the formal nature of and expectations for their interaction. Within the programmatic structure, the formation of a trusting relationship built on confidentiality not only created a foundation for learning but also became a catalyst for the exchange of ideas. Participants’ reflections helped them determine what they could do to improve their professional practice.

Some participants believed there were no drawbacks to participating in a formal mentoring program. Others identified the lack of an assessment measure for professional growth and the struggle of finding the time to fit the mentoring relationship into an already busy schedule. Even so, those participants who identified obstacles highly recommended participation in a formal mentoring program, noting that the benefits far outweighed any drawbacks.

### **Study Findings and the Empirical Literature**

Literature supports the importance of mentoring as a means to facilitate the professional growth of new school leaders (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Gray et al., 2007; Spiro et al., 2007; Thessin et al., 2020). All participants echoed this idea, as they unanimously recommended participation in a mentoring program as a meaningful form of professional development. As a form of job-embedded professional development, mentoring facilitated learning for participants in the areas of communication, time management, leadership, and problem solving involving policy and procedure. With respect to learning as it related to improved leadership, participants reported gaining a better understanding of the administrative role and learning to be a better school leader. This finding is similar to the findings of Grissom and Harrington (2010), who found evidence that school administrators who engaged in mentoring

opportunities performed better in their role of school leader. To build capacity for instructional leadership, mentoring as a form of sustained, job-embedded support may be fundamental in assisting new administrators (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Davis et al., 2005; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Honig, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Peterson, 2002).

The professional relationship between a mentee and mentor, when built on trust and confidentiality, served as a platform for significant growth. This is consistent with current literature that advocates networking among school leaders in the development and support of new school leaders (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Nicholson et al., 2005; Peterson, 2002; Pourchot & Smith, 2004). This is an important finding, as the opportunity to create strong professional relationships with experienced school leaders is commonly seen as an essential component of good administrator professional development opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Peterson, 2002).

When the learning relationship reached a level of trust, adult learners were more comfortable and willing to engage with the environment, increasing the likelihood of professional growth (Bakioglu et al., 2010; Drago-Severson & Aravena, 2011; McAdamis, 2007; Reina & Reina, 1999). Collaboration between mentees and mentors was an essential practice for promoting professional growth. Current literature supports participation in collaborative experiences as a means of professional development for new school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Drago-Severson, 2009; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Holloway, 2004).

Empirical research suggests that the most important component of mentoring programs is the development of a supportive mentor-mentee relationship (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006; Crow & Matthews, 1998; Daresh, 1995; Gehrke, 1988; Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995). Consistent with the literature, novice administrators in this study welcomed the support they received from their mentors (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004; Lashway, 2002). They reported feeling connected and supported as they maneuvered through the demands of being new school administrators.

Discussion and interactive dialogue were instrumental in promoting learning for these novice administrators. This dialogue included mentors' explanations and insights about various topics and situations. Sharing and exploring new ideas and solving problems happened often in conversations and was an important vehicle for learning (Hansford & Ehrich, 2006; Hezlett, 2005). Reflection also played a prominent role in mentees' learning. This finding is congruent with earlier studies that support the importance of reflective practice in the development of new school leaders (Barnett & O'Mahoney, 2002; Fenwick & Pierce, 2002; Petersen, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2009; Strong et al., 2003; Zellner et al., 2002).

Mentees often report that learning occurs through observing their mentors (Hezlett, 2005). Similar to these findings, our mentees also reported that opportunities to observe their mentors contributed to their learning. These authentic, job-embedded experiences were influential learning opportunities for new administrators. In fact, in response to the criticism that pre-service and in-service administrator training programs provide no mechanism for linking theory to practice in a real-world setting (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004), the authentic learning experiences in mentoring programs are seen as a natural vehicle for making these links (Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

Similar to findings in other research, participants in this study reported that a lack of time was a drawback or difficulty when participating in a mentoring relationship (Clayton et al., 2013; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). When novice administrators are feeling time pressures while

handling conflicting priorities, it can be more difficult to maintain a focus on the mentoring relationship.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Improving student achievement continues to be an urgent focus in the U.S. and throughout the world. Second only to highly effective teachers in the classroom, effective school leaders have the most influence on student achievement of any related school factor (Leithwood et al., 2004). We must pay careful attention to leadership development, providing the necessary support and opportunities for professional growth, including mentoring for new school leaders. The practice of mentoring as a form of professional development is well documented in the literature across many fields (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Kay & Wallace, 2009; Laband & Lentz, 1995; Varkey et al., 2012). The findings from this study of a state-mandated mentoring program indicate the nature of learning that takes place as well as the benefits to well-being for participating in such a program. Specific findings from this study that make new contributions to the field include the identification of benefits attributed to the general well-being of mentees as a result of being mentored. More specifically, very little has been reported in previous literature pertaining to mentoring's role in mentees' social and emotional well-being, except possibly for Bodger's (2011) study reporting on reduced stress and isolation. These findings have implications for school districts, universities, state departments of education, and state legislatures.

A commitment to such programs can begin with state legislatures across the U.S. and other national jurisdictions. School leader recruitment and retention are significant issues in the education field. To recruit and retain effective leaders in our schools, states can focus on providing the support necessary for the successful transition of novice administrators into their new roles. The induction period is critical in the career of a school administrator. Experiences during this time can play a large role in whether an administrator chooses to remain in the field or move on to something else. For novice school administrators to mature into successful, reflective leaders, they need to be nurtured and supported in their beginning years. In states where mentoring programs are not mandated, it is left up to individual school districts to implement this support mechanism. Unfortunately, this means inconsistent support at best. Establishing state-mandated formal mentoring programs appears to be important if we are truly committed to the success of new administrators. Missouri's Administrator Mentoring Program (AMP) is an example of a mentoring program implemented by a U.S. state legislature for the purpose of supporting new administrators as they transition from preparation to practice and assume their roles as school leaders.

A challenging implication is the difficulty that state departments and ministries of education will likely face regarding resource allocation. This could be interpreted as an insurmountable obstacle, especially given current economic constraints. Policy leaders will likely be faced with making hard choices about maintaining a commitment to providing the necessary funds to implement mentoring programs for new school administrators.

The findings of this study imply a need for closer relationships between universities and local school districts. There remains a gap between the manner in which university programs prepare school leaders and the reality of their day-to-day responsibilities once they assume their new positions. Potential school leaders need not only a theoretical foundation of school leadership but also an equal understanding of the nuts and bolts of being successful school leaders. Leading and managing are both important skill sets for a novice administrator. Through strong partnerships, universities and local school districts can prefigure incumbent

mentoring with a renewed focus on internship experiences that privilege the importance of practical knowledge and job-embedded learning for aspiring administrators.

If schools and their systems are serious about meeting the academic needs of our children and raising students to higher levels of achievement, we must create a practice of collaboration. State legislatures, state departments of education, universities, and school districts can work together to create a culture of support for education and its school leaders (Gray et al., 2007).

Professional development support for new school leaders, including mentoring programs, is currently in place in many states and school districts. Even so, the existence of a mentoring program provides no guarantee that new school leaders will gain the skills and wisdom necessary to be effective leaders. Developing and implementing more effective mentoring programs to support future leaders begins with understanding whether meaningful learning is currently taking place in established programs and whether new principals' general well-being is being considered.

As we gain an understanding of what new school leaders are currently learning, and how they are learning, in such programs, state leaders, universities, and school districts can use this knowledge to plan effective mentoring models for future school leaders. Mentoring is not the only solution for supporting novice school administrators, and, of course, there is a range of drawbacks. However, as future generations of school administrators take on the challenge of leading schools in an ever-changing, increasingly demanding school climate, formal mentoring programs show great promise as an effective professional development opportunity designed to facilitate high levels of learning and provide the support needed to ensure school administrator well-being and success.

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