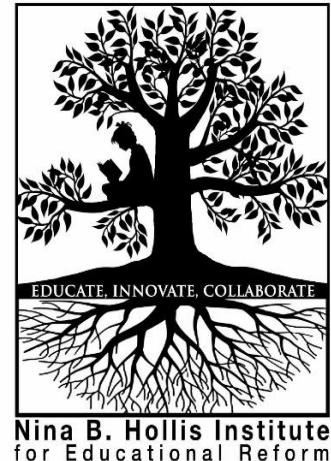


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# Principal Coaching in Central Office Supervisory Roles: Exploring Persistent Tensions

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## Abstract

Scholars have increasingly focused on the practice of central office administrators. Principal supervisors, who often work in central offices, have received attention as scholars view these administrators as an essential source of support for school principals. This study employed a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 principal supervisors who participated in coaching partnership facilitated by a private, mid-sized university over three academic years. Additionally, the data set included 127 hours of non-participant observation and 59 documents. The findings indicate that principal supervisors had difficulty reconciling coaching behaviors within the context of their supervisory roles. In particular, supervisors found the expectations associated with their role more prescriptive than anticipated and thus an impediment to the adoption of coaching behaviors in their work. Supervisors thus sought to adjust their practice to accommodate coaching behaviors. However, given expectations associated with their role, supervisors often resorted to directive and supervisory behaviors. A primary conclusion of this study is that leadership coaching behaviors might not be readily implemented within the context of supervisory practice unless adequate support, training, and organizational reforms occur. The findings thus have implications for the configuration of central office supervisory roles as well as how leadership preparation programs prepare candidates for central office supervisory positions.

## Keywords

principal supervision, central office, leadership coaching, leadership support

## Introduction

Central office supervisors play an important role in supporting school principals who can lead improvements in teaching and learning (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Honig, 2012; Mangin, 2007; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Indeed, the link between central office support and effective

instructional leadership has become increasingly evident in research exploring central office reforms (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). Leadership coaching represents one strategy district supervisors might use to stimulate principal reflection and encourage professional development (Rhodes, 2012; Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013). Research suggests that districts increasingly encourage principal supervisors to adopt coaching behaviors with classroom teachers (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, & Simon, 2013; Honig, 2012; Honig, et al., 2009) and new standards for principal supervision position coaching as an essential supervisory behavior (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015). The development of these standards reflects the view that leadership coaching may support principal professional development, particularly when coupled with feedback about teaching and learning (Bickman, Goldring, DeAndrade, Breda, & Goff, 2012; Goff, Guthrie, Goldring, & Bickman, 2014). A more general view is that coaching potentially helps principals integrate instructional leadership behaviors over time (Gallucci, Van Lare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010). Indeed, supervisors who model appropriate instructional leadership behaviors for principals, as frequently happens in leadership coaching, might significantly enhance school-based student learning outcomes (Honig, 2012).

Surprisingly, few empirical studies have considered how central office administrators learn coaching behaviors let alone how the adoption of such behaviors might require rethinking the roles held by central office administrators. The absence of research in this area thus represents a significant gap in our current understanding of central office practice. Indeed, central to this study is the assumption that principal supervisors who adopt coaching practices are likely challenging the conventional understanding of principal supervision and the roles occupied by supervisors. Thus, this study examines the role tensions that arise as central office principal supervisors assume a coaching orientation within the context of a university-school district coaching partnership. In addressing these tensions, two related research questions are addressed: First, what challenges do central office principal supervisors encounter as they adopt coaching as a primary focus of their work? Second, how does the introduction of coaching behaviors challenge, expand, or refine existing understandings of the principal supervisor's role within a central office context? The paper proceeds with a review of the literature related to central office principal supervision and leadership coaching. Next, I discuss the methods used to complete this research. I conclude by presenting my research findings and discussing these findings in light of our current understanding of leadership coaching.

## **Literature Review**

Scholars have increasingly focused their research on understanding the practice of central offices and the administrators who work within them (Coburn, Toure, & Tamashita, 2009; Farley-Ripple, 2012; Honig, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2015; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Swinnerton, 2007). Scholars suggest that leadership practices within central offices differ in significant ways from that of leadership practice in schools (Honig, 2012). Coaching is increasingly thought to be an essential aspect of school district support for individual school principals. In fact, recently approved model standards for principal supervision highlight the significance of coaching as a district-level leadership activity (CCSSO, 2015). As these standards note, "Principal supervisors coach and support individual principals and engage in effective

professional learning strategies to help principals grow as instructional leaders” (CCSSO, 2015, p. 16). Rainey and Honig (2015) have further observed, that this often requires shifting the role of the principal supervisor to specifically focus on principal’s growth, learning, and instructional leadership practice. Indeed, one of the core shifts in principal supervisor’s practice involves moving away from command-and-control relationships wherein in the supervisor directs the principal to take specific leadership actions toward a relationship that more generally resembles a form of supervisory teaching. This involves “intentional moves to help principals think and act in new ways” (Rainey & Honig, 2015, p. 21).

Coaching has thus become one of the many unique skillsets that districts expect central office principal supervisors to use in support of individual principals’ professional learning needs. The research literature defines a leadership coach as someone who “provides continuing support that is safe and confidential” and defines leadership coaching as a form of professional support that seeks to nurture “significant personal, professional, and institutional growth through a process that unfolds over time” (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005, p. 10). This definition reflects an understanding of leadership coaching articulated in the Blended Coaching Model (Bloom, et al., 2005). This model rests on the assumption that coaches employ active listening plus five questioning strategies (e.g., facilitative, instructional, collaborative, consultative, and transformational) to shape principal’s thinking about a particular problem of practice. A central objective of leadership coaching is to encourage principals to think about their practice and thus adjust their practice given their emerging or enlightened understanding. To adequately support administrators, leadership coaches are expected to occupy a non-supervisory role that allows administrators to express themselves freely without fear of judgment, evaluation, or reprisal.

### **The Tensions between Supervision and Coaching**

One of the enduring questions is whether principal supervisors can, in fact, be coaches. Bloom and colleagues (2005) note that their experience suggests that “it is difficult if not impossible for supervisors to provide the kind of intensive leadership coaching” that is required by Blended Coaching (p. 112). Part of this difficulty rests in the inherent tension between engaging in coaching, which is intentionally non-judgmental, and supervision, which necessarily involves some aspect of evaluation or judgment. Indeed, a supervisors' capacity to direct, evaluate, hire, and fire principals they supervise often supersedes the extent to which they can formulate a trusting coaching relationship. This research does not suggest, however, that supervisors cannot employ coaching strategies within the context of their supervisory practice. Indeed, as Bloom and colleagues (2005) note, "Effective supervisors can and do use coaching strategies and skills to support the growth of their subordinates" (p. 112). Principal supervisors might use such strategies to differentiate support for individual school leaders based on their professional learning needs and the unique organization-level conditions found within their schools. Indeed, in previous research, three colleagues and I noted that administrators generally valued the differentiated nature of coaching support (Silver, Lochmiller, Copland, & Tripps, 2009).

Surprisingly, few scholars in educational leadership have examined how principal supervisors take up coaching behaviors within the context of their supervisory roles. In one notable study, Fink and Resnick (2001) examined superintendent support for school principals in New York City. This

support included individualized coaching for school administrators provided by the superintendent and deputy superintendent who supervised them. Relatedly, the district also embedded coaching activities within the daily work of running a school district. More recently, Honig (2012) studied the work practices of central office administrators in urban school districts and found that modeling, which is essentially a form of coaching, was one of the primary practices used in districts which had undertaken significant district-level reforms. Honig (2012) noted that central office administrators who supervised school principals “explicitly modeled or demonstrated how to act like an instructional leader as a strategy for strengthening principals’ instructional leadership” (p. 751). While these studies point to the possibility and value of coaching, they do not explain how supervisors managed shifts required in their role when assuming a coaching orientation. These studies also provide limited insight into the tensions that arise as coaching expectations are placed on the supervisor by their school district. Further, they provide no insight into the supervisor’s evolving conception of their role given the introduction of these expectations.

Researchers outside the field of education have spent considerably more time exploring the relationship between supervision and coaching. Indeed, several books have examined the possible intersections between supervisory and coaching practice (Clutterbuck & Whitaker, 2016; Cochrane & Newton, 2017; Hawkins & Schwenk, 2006; Hawkins & Smith, 2013; Hawkins & Turner, 2017). These volumes present coaching and supervision as mostly compatible behaviors, particularly when supervisors adopt a growth orientation and thus strive to support their supervisees learning. At base, the compatibility between coaching and supervision depends on the supervisor’s ability to shift their thinking about their role and modify their practice at appropriate points to enable coaching behaviors to occur in concert with those more akin to supervision. In central office supervisor roles, this requires disrupting existing relationships based on accountability and authority (Honig & Rainey, 2014). This disruption involves shifting supervisor practice toward the more extensive use of modeling as well as focusing supervisory conversations more intentionally on issues related to teaching and learning (Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework and Perspective**

To inform my analysis of the data, I drew upon role theory (Biddle, 1979) as well as research describing the evolution of leadership roles in K-12 school contexts (Brown-Ferrigno, 2003; Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002). Biddle (1979) defines a role as “behaviors that are characteristic of persons in a context” (p. 56). Accordingly, role theory explains how individuals ‘make’ and ‘take up’ roles within organizational structures and norms (Hart, 1992). This perspective explains not only what supervisors do but also how the school district organization prescribes and evaluates their actions within this role. Prescription refers to the expectations and standards associated with the role. For supervisors, these expectations often relate to supervision and monitoring of schools, evaluation of school principals, and crisis management when local challenges require district intervention. Evaluation refers to the efficacy with which the individual meets the expectations and standards placed upon them. Thus, for supervisors, critical evaluative questions relate to how they interact with, support, guide, coach, mentor, and model for principals and schools they oversee (CCSSO, 2015). Taken together, then, role theory offers a useful theoretical perspective

to understand the underlying tensions that arise as central office supervisors assume both evaluative and coaching responsibilities.

## **Methods**

I completed this qualitative case study (Yin, 2017) using data obtained from 53 semi-structured interviews I conducted with 20 principal supervisors employed in two urban school districts. Each of the supervisors who participated in this study received training in leadership coaching from a university-based leadership coaching program housed at the mid-sized private university. The program provided support to principal supervisors as part of a multi-year university-district partnership funded by a family foundation. The partnership broadly sought to improve leadership skills of novice and experienced administrators within the two urban school districts. The partnership introduced the principal supervisors to coaching behaviors found in the Blended Coaching Model (Bloom, et al., 2005) developed by the New Teacher Center. The blended coaching model engages coaches in reflective conversations that combined a series of questioning strategies (e.g., instructional, facilitative, collaborative, mediational, transformational).

Initially, the program was established by the university to provide support to newly certificated school administrators who secured their first full-time administrative positions after completing the university's leadership preparation program. However, recognizing the value of leadership coaching, the program quickly expanded its services to provide coaching support to experienced school administrators and administrators working in central office roles in two urban school districts. A grant from a private family foundation funded a partnership between the two districts and the university. The partnership employed a cost-sharing program model, whereby each district assumed an increasing portion of the cost of providing coaching support over a three year period. The district used professional development funds from Title II-A of the No Child Left Behind Act to support the partnership.

The partnership had two specific goals. First, the partnership provided support to principals working in schools struggling academically. The district selected these schools based on their recent performance on the state's assessment of student learning. Second, the partnership provided training and support to central office principal supervisors in coaching behaviors. Training emphasized how to use leadership coaching strategies to support principals they supervised as well as providing support to supervisors when engaging in those strategies with principals under their direct supervision. The grant funded the partnership for three years. As part of the partnership agreement, both of the school districts invested professional development resources in the partnership. The resources from the district provided a portion of the funding needed to deliver professional development sessions for the supervisors as well as covering a portion of the cost associated with providing coaching support to school principals.

## **Research Participants**

In total, the research study included 20 program participants working as central office principal supervisors or school principals. Principal supervisors had an average of 19.4 years of experience in K-12 education and had worked in their role for 7.1 years. Of the 20 research participants, 18 participants had previous experience working in or serving as an administrator for Title I schools.

The participants had similar characteristics regardless of their gender or race/ethnicity. During the completion of this study, two supervisors were re-assigned to different school clusters but continued coaching the same principals.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Study’s Research Participants (Year 1-3)

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Non-White<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Previous Experience in Title I Schools</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Supervisors</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>18</b>
With Graduate Degree	10	4	6	4	6	8
Avg. Years Experience <sup>b</sup>	19.4	17.5	18.3	18.3	18.4	19.3
Avg. Years in Role	7.1	6.3	7.3	7.0	7.1	7.0

<sup>a</sup>. Data has been reported as White and non-White to protect the identity of participants in the study. Non-white participants include individuals with race/ethnicity listed as African American, Black, Latino(a), and Asian/Pacific Islander based on personnel data supplied by the school districts.

<sup>b</sup>. Average years of experience represents all experience in K-12 education, including service as a K-12 classroom teacher and K-12 school administrator. Administrative positions included assistant principal, vice principal, principal, and dean of students.

## Data Collection

I collected data across three academic years. Data collection began in August of the first year of the partnership and concluded in June of the third year of the partnership. Data collection included a combination of semi-structured interviews with program participants, direct and video-based observations of coaching sessions, and retrieval of documents from program participants and staff. I describe each type of data collection below.

*Semi-Structured Participant Interviews.* I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 program participants in the fall and spring of each academic year. The interview protocol focused on the challenges they encountered as they began using coaching strategies within the context of their supervisory practice. Questions presented on the protocol also sought to identify how the expectations placed on the central office administrators enabled or inhibited their ability to use coaching strategies. In all, I completed 53 interviews with each interview lasting an average of 47 minutes. A professional transcriptionist transcribed the digitally recorded interviews. Scheduling constraints did not allow every supervisor to participate in every interview cycle.

*Non-Participant Observations.* I also completed 127 hours of non-participant observation during the three years of data collection. My observations included 72 hours of in-person observation conducted during campus-based professional development workshops provided to the supervisors, 23 hours of non-participant observation conducted during coaching sessions involving supervisors and school principals at individual school sites, and 22 hours of video-based observation collected by supervisors working with principals they coached. Given the breadth of the observations I conducted, I did not use a structured observation protocol. I recorded my observation notes using a laptop. When recording activities, I took note of participant interactions and exchanges which

demonstrated how each supervisor adopted coaching behaviors in their supervisor practice or described how coaching aligned with their role as a central office administrator.

A particularly important aspect of my data collection involved observing supervisors working with principals in their district using coaching behaviors. Throughout the program, supervisors were expected to work with a principal they supervised to practice their coaching skills and learn how to use coaching to support the principals. The coaching sessions often took place at the principal's school. Supervisors also video recorded 60-minutes of themselves working with principals in their district using coaching behaviors. These videos served as a complement to my on-site observations of coaching sessions. The videos were collected twice a year (i.e., Fall and Spring) by the director of the coaching partnership. The videos were designed to provide evidence to the program's external funder that supervisors were using the coaching skills presented. In all, 15 of the 20 principal supervisors granted their permission to watch these videos and derive observation notes from them. As with my on-site observations, I looked for exchanges between the supervisors and principals that demonstrated how they were using the coaching skills and how the coaching behaviors desired by the program aligned with their work as a supervisor.

*Document Collection.* I collected a total of 59 documents from program staff and participants throughout the data collection period. These documents included examples obtained during in-person observations of coaching sessions as well as documents I downloaded from the website of the two school districts and the coaching program. The documents included job descriptions for central office supervisors, organizational charts illustrating supervisory responsibilities and reporting relationships, school improvement plans, assessment plans, classroom observation protocols, and teacher evaluation templates among others. The documents served as independent evidence for statements obtained through interviews and exchanges recorded during observations.

### **Data Analysis**

I completed a thematic analysis of the qualitative data using Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package. I used a combination of codes defined a priori and those which emerged from the data analysis. I developed a priori codes using concepts drawn from role theory (Biddle, 1979) as well as research describing the evolution of leadership roles in K-12 school contexts (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002). Throughout my analysis, I consulted the broader educational leadership literature, role theory, and studies of central office supervisory roles to inform the codes I derived. The final coding scheme thus reflected a combination of descriptive and inferential codes. I completed my coding in two phases. First, I applied descriptive codes to reduce the size of the data corpus. Descriptive codes highlighted statements and examples illustrating how coaching aligned with supervisory expectations. Codes included single words and short phrases. For example, I applied the code "coaching challenge" to statements describing challenges that supervisors focused on within the context of their coaching interactions with principals. Next, I applied inferential codes to passages I coded initially. These codes assigned a higher level of meaning to the text and sought to make connections to the existing literature. For instance, I applied the code "conflicting supervisory expectations" to denote examples or passages within my interviews, observation notes, and documents that illustrated conflict or lack of alignment between coaching and supervisory



responsibilities. In some places, I found these passages in clear, declarative statements offered by the study's participants. In other passages, I inferred the meaning based on the context for comments offered by the participant. To derive themes, I looked across the passages where lower inference codes were applied and identified patterns within these codes from which I later derived categories. Themes thus reflect common patterns across categories.

## **Findings**

Supervisors had difficulty addressing the prescriptive nature of their supervisory role and found the expectations placed on them by their district binding and often a significant barrier to embedding coaching behaviors within their practice. Further, supervisors spent considerable time navigating the role expectations placed on them. This navigation often involved deciding when and how to coach versus when and how to supervise. These expectations stemmed both from the district (i.e., what it meant to be a supervisor) and school principals (i.e., what it meant to be supervised). These expectations proved difficult to overcome. Finally, because of the prescriptive nature of the role expectations, supervisors often resorted to supervisory behaviors that worked at cross-purposes with coaching model. These behaviors involved telling or directing the principals toward specific courses of action instead of prompting principals to reflect on their practice. I discuss each of these themes below.

### *Theme 1: Addressing the Prescriptive Nature of the Supervisor's Role*

Institutional expectations established by the school district made it difficult for supervisors to serve as coaches for the principals. Job descriptions and other formal documentation provided by each of the districts noted the principal supervision was one of the critical responsibilities for central office supervisors. This responsibility extended to all facets of the school's operations, including those related to classroom instruction, student support services, human resources, fiscal management, and building operations. Central office supervisors were thus expected by the district to direct – not coach – their principals toward compliance with district policies across a range of activities. As one supervisor noted,

Our work is about directing the schools toward the district's long-term improvement goals and helping principals follow policies established by the School Board. We have very strong oversight responsibility. I tell my principals, I am the shepherd, and they are the sheep. I want them to move as a flock.

Referring to their role as being partly about oversight demonstrates an orientation to working with school principals. Oversight suggests that central office supervisors determined whether schools met or did not meet district expectations. As such, their orientation was less about the principal's growth than it was ensuring that the school has met performance objectives.

Within the context of the partnership, however, the district expected central office supervisors to support principal's individual professional growth using coaching behaviors described as part of the Blended Coaching Model. Supervisors were thus required to select one principal they supervised to practice engaging in coaching support. Eighteen of the 20 supervisors selected a principal whom they supervised directly. Two selected principals who they previously supervised

but who had since moved to a different school setting. Sixteen of these principals worked in elementary schools, and four worked in secondary schools. Most supervisors selected principals whom they described as "moderately experienced" or "familiar with their schools and its challenges." None of the principals selected by the supervisors were on a plan of improvement at the time the supervisor selected them for coaching, which was an expectation of the program. Documentation provided to each of the supervisors by the program explained the expectations for their work with the principals. These expectations focused on "supporting principal growth" and working with the principal "to improve their instructional leadership practice." While supervisors were not asked to select principals working on specific topics, 18 chose principals whose work focused on improving classroom instruction in a grade that was subject to the state's accountability framework, a teacher who was on a plan of improvement, or teachers engaged in specific types of professional development. As one supervisor explained, "[my principal] is working with her staff this year to improve instruction in 4<sup>th</sup> grade... she is working on making sure that every student reaches the 4<sup>th</sup> grade ready to pass the test in English/Language Arts and Mathematics." Another supervisor noted that she had selected a principal who was "fighting hard to get the best teachers in front of her kids." Collectively, the supervisors used these challenges as a basis for coaching principals. The focus was thus to move away from issues related to school operations and to focus on issues of instructional improvement.

Upon beginning their coaching with principals, however, supervisors quickly discovered that the evaluative expectation placed on them by districts was often more prescriptive than they anticipated. For instance, they struggled to step back from evaluating, judging, or directing the principals when engaging in coaching conversations. This difficulty was especially true when supervisors were working with principals who were trying to place teachers on a plan of improvement. This tension manifests itself within coaching conversations. As one supervisor observed in an email to the program director, "Today's coaching session was just awful. I could not find a comfortable way to address the issues she wanted to talk about because it kept coming out as me critiquing her work. ARGH! This is so challenging." Another supervisor reported that she was "overreaching" with her principal to prevent her from making mistakes that would require restarting the plan of improvement process. Both comments demonstrated the supervisor's difficulty shifting from a traditional supervisory stance. Another supervisor noted in an interview that "coaching involves a time horizon that in this principal's case she does not have... she must get scores up this year, or she will not have a job. The superintendent has legitimate concerns." This statement reflects the supervisor's concerns about the principal's performances, part of which was informed by her first-hand knowledge of the superintendent's concerns about the principal's performance.

Concerns about principal performance and their own performance rating caused tension in the supervisor's understanding of their role and often prompted supervisors to struggle to integrate the non-evaluative expectations of coaching within their day-to-day professional obligations. Supervisors perceived that evaluation interfered with the opportunity to coach principals in their district. As one supervisor observed, "Coaching often gets put to the side when the principal calls with a crisis or is himself in a crisis. You need to be much more directive to avoid having things flare up." Five of the supervisors offered examples of experiences that they had which required

their direct intervention in a school where they were working as a leadership coach. In one instance, a principal reported to their supervisor that they had a teacher who had missed five days of work and she had just learned that the teacher was unlikely to return for the academic year. In this situation, the supervisor was thus forced to intervene to ensure that the school had a long-term substitute in place and that the timing of the substitute's placement did not impact the school's instructional program. Given these situations, supervisors thus subjugated their coaching conversations with more direct statements telling the principal what she or he needed to do. Collectively, these findings suggest that the supervisory role is prescriptive and not easily adjusted in response to coaching expectations.

*Theme 2: Difficulty Navigating Competing Role Expectations*

Data suggest that supervisors struggled to identify effective ways to navigate the competing role tensions and expectations that arose. Expectations related both to what it meant for supervisors to enact their role (i.e., being supervisors) and how principals perceived this role should be enacted within the context of their supervisory exchanges (i.e., being supervised). Six supervisors reported that principals had an established expectation that supervisors could not wholly step out of their supervisor role to focus on the principal's learning needs or goals. Four supervisors noted that they had open conversations with the principal about the principal's concerns that exposing their professional learning needs could potentially impact the supervisor's assessment of their performance. As one supervisor commented, "[she] is not willing to open up because she has had difficulty and is having some challenges and she is worried that I will hold that against her. She is part of the culture that says our work is about judging each other and not about helping each other grow." Another supervisor observed that "principals work from an expectation that our job is to evaluate them." Both comments illustrate the tension supervisors perceived between what had traditionally been their role and the role they were being asked to assume.

What is striking is that principal supervisors openly struggled with and ultimately felt ineffective at identifying strategies that helped them navigate the competing role tensions. Thirteen supervisors indicated that their most common strategy was to schedule coaching meetings intentionally as one way to distinguish their time from more traditional conversations about school and district issues. As one supervisor reflected, "Even scheduling coaching meetings is not enough. What I find is that taking time to meet with principals in coaching is quickly consumed with other business that has come up in between our last meetings." One supervisor appeared aware of this tension as he noted, "I guess I am cheating to get my coaching in because I am not doing it when I am engaged in supervision. I do not see how I can do it that way." Another supervisor noted that his approach to coaching involved setting time limits on conversations with principals. These limits allowed the supervisor to address the principal's needs while still engaging in an earnest attempt to coach the principal in support of their professional learning. These strategies had the effect of separating coaching from their supervisory practice instead of embedding coaching within their work.

In part, this separation is explained by the fact that supervisors were concerned that they meet the needs of the school principals. Supervisors indicated that principals did not always invite or encourage coaching support given the nature of their requests. Instead, supervisors perceived that

principals saw coaching as slowing or delaying information they needed to improve their schools, which they feared principals would perceive as being unresponsive to school needs. Four supervisors noted that coaching tended to “slow down” their work with principals and that thus delays were challenging given the nature of the requests that principals often made. One supervisor offered the following explanation for when he would use coaching with a principal:

You coach when you have time and you do not always have it. Coaching is really about slowing down and thinking about what this principal needs from a different perspective. It is not a judging perspective; it is a growth perspective. But when your building is on fire, you cannot start going into a coaching mode because it just demands action. In that situation, you know, you have got to be responsive, so you get it contained and get the resources or supports that the principal needs. I think principals value supervisors who get things done more than anything else and so that has to be what guides you sometimes. You cannot take the time when there's a crisis brewing. Principals do not let you do that.

As this comment illustrates, the supervisor thus reserved coaching for non-urgent, long-term issues. These issues included establishing priorities for school improvement, analyzing school achievement data, and planning professional development for classroom teachers. One surprising finding was that principals generally perceived coaching conversations with their supervisors to be powerful opportunities to consider issues related to (in)equity and social justice. However, these conversations proved rare in comparison with other conversations the principal supervisors had. Indeed, most conversations I observed did not involve these topics but instead related to teacher evaluation and school operations, which supervisors perceived principals expected them to be more directive.

Interestingly, observation data from coaching sessions between supervisors and principals illustrated how supervisors navigated these expectations. In one coaching session, I observed a supervisor pausing repeatedly and reminding the principal that the purpose of their conversation was not to resolve administrative issues but instead to focus on the principal's growth. In another session, I noted that a supervisor often asked the question, “How does this support your growth?” to remind the principal of the purpose of their conversation. Within these exchanges, I noted that principals often shifted what they were asking the supervisor. For instance, in one observation, I noted that the principal stopped asking the supervisor about a human resource issue and instead began discussing her plans for a professional development activity. While the tendency was for principals to shift their conversation with the supervisor, I also noted three distinct occasions where this shift did not occur. Instead, the principal continued to focus on the administrative issue, and thus the supervisor had to follow the principal's lead and respond.

### *Theme 3: Falling Back Into Supervisory Behaviors*

Given the different expectations facing them and the challenges of integrating coaching in their role, I found that supervisors often “fell back on” their familiar supervisory routines when engaging with principals even when they were engaged in coaching sessions. I noted within my observations that supervisors often told principals what they should do, assessed and/or critiqued the principal's practice as opposed to prompting reflection, or situated their comments about

challenges the principal faced within the context of district initiatives as opposed to the principal's individual needs or concerns. Supervisors acknowledged that this orientation rarely related to the principal's individual growth needs but felt compelled to push, encourage, or direct principals instead of coaching them. As one supervisor observed, "I am coaching principals when I can, but sometimes you just have to come prepared with an answer." Another supervisor offered a similar statement noting that "you have to clear the deck and make space for coaching to happen." Notes I recorded during my observations of coaching sessions further described the supervisor's tendency to use supervisory behaviors. In one coaching session, I noted that the supervisor "pushed the principal" to determine a course of action related to a special education student instead of inviting the principal to reflect upon various actions she might take. In another session, I noted the supervisor dismissing a concern the principal shared about his school's reputation based on its recent performance on the state assessment of student learning. As the supervisor noted, "you do not have to be worried about that... no one but you thinks about it like that." This statement followed one from the principal expressing concern that his school would be viewed as a "failing school" because of its performance. In another coaching session, I observed a supervisor shifting the focus from the principal's growth to the expectations of the school district. Citing a district expectation that principals spend a minimum of 10 hours per week in classrooms, the supervisor told the principal what he should do when his comments suggested that he was unsure how to achieve the expectation.

**Principal:** I am not sure how to get the 10 hours of observation. You know? It is just not always possible with so many other challenges facing me. Do you have any suggestions?

**Supervisor:** The district expects that you spend, uh, 10 hours in classrooms every week. This means observing instruction for 10 hours. I think what we expect is that you find ways to budget your time to meet that goal. We do not offer any particular suggestions about how you should do that...

**Principal:** But are [there] things other principals are doing to get most of the hours? I just...

**Supervisor:** We expect all principals to get 10 hours of observation in every week. So all principals, at least those I supervise, are getting their time in every week.

As this exchange illustrates, the supervisor repeatedly returned to the district's expectations and did not consider what the principal was asking. This exchange indicates that the principal was most interested in the supervisor's suggestions about how she could meet the district's expectations for regular classroom observation. The supervisor focused only on what the expectation was and did not offer specific suggestions to guide the principal's practice. Further, the supervisor did not engage the principal in asking her about her current practice or how she distributed her workload which might have afforded her the opportunity to reflect on her practice and devise solutions to challenges she identified as important. Collectively, these examples illustrate the extent to which supervisors struggled to break from their supervisory practices and instead engage in coaching behaviors.

Supervisors' reliance on supervisory behaviors suggested, at least in part, that the district had not entirely shifted its understanding of the supervisor's role nor provided adequate space for the supervisors to make sense of the behaviors that coaching actually required. Indeed, documentation provided by the district's personnel department described the supervisor's as "responsible for the conduct of school personnel, particularly school administrators" and noted that this responsibility "extended to supervision, evaluation, and termination." As one supervisor noted, "My work is really about directing the schools toward the district's stated priorities or objectives... I work in support of the principals who report to me, advocate for their needs, and try to determine what I can to assist them in their schools." This description was like those offered by 9 of the supervisors I interviewed. Their descriptions stressed traditional supervisor orientations and only tangentially stressed the importance of supporting principal's growth or professional learning. As one supervisor acknowledged, "I think my work is really about accountability first and professional growth second. I spend a lot of my time focused on what schools and their principals must do. It's compliance. This is what the district superintendent expects of me." The absence of such a shift appeared to undermine the potential that coaching had as well as complicated the work that supervisors hoped to do.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Given recent research suggesting that the role of central office supervisors has shifted and that modeling may be an essential aspect of the work (Corcoran, et al., 2013; Honig, 2012), the research presented suggests the adoption of coaching strategies by principal supervisors may be less straightforward than it seems. The study highlights the inherent conflicts within supervisors' roles as they attempt to assume both supervisory and coaching behaviors. This finding contradicts other research, which has effectively positioned coaching and supervision as compatible (Cochrane & Newton, 2017; Hawkins & Smith, 2013). Moreover, it highlights the somewhat unique conditions that exist within school districts, provides further evidence about the supervisory roles held by central office administrators and may extend the existing conversation about how leadership preparation programs might more intentionally prepare supervisors to meet expectations increasingly placed upon them (CCSSO, 2015).

The findings from this study have implications for how districts design supervisory roles within the context of school district central offices. First and foremost, school districts must recognize coaching as a critical supervisory behavior and align job descriptions, authority structures, and job responsibilities accordingly. Second, supervisors must identify strategies to integrate coaching into their work. Within this study, supervisors found it helpful to schedule coaching conversations separately from those involving more mundane administrative matters. Finally, supervisors themselves must embrace principal growth as one of their key responsibilities. Frequently, supervisors view their role as an evaluative one that does not relate to the professional growth needs of principals. This is a perspective that aligns with research on central office practice (Honig, 2012) as well as policy guidance concerning the most desirable behaviors of principal supervisors (CCSSO, 2015).

Finally, the findings presented also have implications for leadership preparation program designs. Many preparation programs do not provide specific instruction about principal supervision or

coaching. Given the adoption of these behaviors within national standards, it may be that this content could be valuable for pre-service candidates who are preparing for district leadership positions. For instance, providing students who are preparing for the superintendence with a course dedicated to principal supervision might be an appropriate first step in ensuring that future supervisors understand how to coach principals when problems arise.

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