

# **Beginning with Sustainability in Mind: A Study of Novice Principals' Perceptions of an Urban District Principal Mentoring Program**

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## **Abstract**

This case study sought to address how one principal mentoring program supported the development of eight novice elementary principals serving in a large Midwestern urban school district. Using semi-structured interviews, the novice principals described their experiences as participants in the urban district's mentoring program. Results indicated that novice principals benefit from a) formal mentoring programs, b) quality time with mentors, c) mentors with strong leadership experience, d) mentoring guidance with executing district policies and procedures allowing them to navigate job expectations, and e) a positive relationship with mentors that includes open communication.

*Key words:* educational administration, urban educational leadership development, novice principals, mentoring, mentorship, educational leadership

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry qualitative study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of novice elementary principals' experience in a large Midwestern urban district's first year principal mentoring program. As such, the study was guided by two questions: 1) What elements of the principal mentoring program did the principals perceive

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prepared them for an urban principalship? 2) What value was in their relationship with their mentor? School principals are essential for providing strong school climates and improving student outcomes. And yet, even with national attention on the advancement of student outcomes, principal turnover is a national concern. A 2019 study by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) reported five reasons principals leave their jobs, aside from retirement or dismissal (Levin & Bradley, 2019): inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and ineffective accountability policies. Explored in this study and of interest to us was the first of the five identified causes for principal turnover, inadequate preparation and professional development, and support.

The NASSP and LPI report indicated that research consistently highlights the relationship between principal effectiveness and student success. It also highlighted the nation's consistent *underinvestment* in principal effectiveness with several studies finding correlations between principal turnover and student test score losses across grade levels and subjects. This is supported by Daresh's (2007) earlier argument that mentorship plays a critical role in strengthening school leadership. Changing educational reforms like teacher evaluations, school improvement guidelines, and high-stakes assessments provide little time for new principals to ease into their roles as instructional leaders (Whitaker, 2003). To that end, the significance of principal mentorship is important and attention to the effectiveness of mentoring programs is key to the development of strong school leaders at the beginning of their career to better prepare and sustain them throughout their career trajectory.

Arguably the apex of education reform is academic achievement. Large urban school districts have been especially scrutinized by stakeholders to increase student academic

performance. Urban school leaders are charged with the primary responsibility of closing the two identified achievement gaps of greatest concern. Darling-Hammond (2010) identified the first as the gap between white and more affluent students and students of color and those in poverty. The second is between U.S. students and those in other high-achieving nations that have made greater and more equitable investments in education over the last 30 years. Earlier, Nevarez and Wood (2007), determined that closing the achievement gap for low-performing, urban students can be a daunting task for new urban school leaders given students of color continue to lag behind their similarly situated others. Preparing leaders to competently address the multi-faceted disparity entails understanding poverty impacts, and the culture differences unique to urban sites, in addition to navigating ill-conceived discipline policies harmful to student learning outcomes.

The demands to address discipline and other non-academic barriers prevalent in what Milner (2012) describes as urban intensiveness, can deter highly qualified principal applicants from seeking employment in large urban school districts. Thus, these schools are often staffed with inexperienced teachers lacking instructional expertise, in high need of support. Trying to overcome many challenges, as a novice principal, can be unsettling and significantly influence their perception of their own effectiveness during their first few years as an urban school principals.

Novice principals unfamiliar with the challenges of urban social or cultural characteristics Noguera (2003) described as “relatively poor and, in many cases, non-white” (p. 23) must at the same time develop pedagogical skill. According to Hernandez and Kose (2012), “principals’ understanding and skills pertaining to diversity are important in leading diverse schools and preparing all students for a democratic and multi-cultural society” (p.1). They furthered that becoming a culturally competent leader must be a fundamental aspect of school

principals' preparation and practice. While principal preparation programs are increasingly realizing the importance of culturally competent leadership, effective veteran principals are keenly aware of the need to know and understand the community they serve. Cultural incompetence can be countered by explicit modeling from an effective, experienced, and culturally sensitive mentor (Khalifa, 2020). Thus, the need for efficacious principal mentoring programs as principals transition from their formal training to serve in communities they are practicing is critical.

Scholars too have acknowledged that the mentorship of novice principals is a significant need in urban settings where poverty, minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and poor academic performance are prevalent (Banks & Banks, 2004). Daresh and Playko (1992) posited that a novice principal mentoring program could be an effective tool to help beginning principals survive their first few years. The current responsibilities encumbered by a school leader transcends beyond the school building, involving the school community, business partnerships, and other educational entities (Beard, 2021; Yirci & Kocabas, 2010). Balancing the numerous aspects and developing their instructional leadership skills through a strong mentoring program can help novice principals overcome many challenges faced during their first year on the job (Yirci & Kocabas, 2010). We sought novice principal's perception of their mentoring as informative for other districts seeking to equip first year administrators with the tools to succeed.

### **Literature Review**

School effectiveness has been linked both tangentially and directly to school leadership yielding a variety of well researched leadership conceptualization from Fiedler's (1964) contingency model of leadership to instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), and more recently, relational and context centered leadership (Beard, 2018; Khalifa, 2020).

Leadership conceptualization matters in many ways however the effectiveness of school leadership continues to be measured by student performance. The focus of this work was not on any one specific leadership theory or model, but rather on the principal as learner in a mentoring relationship. While acknowledging district level support of novice principals, professional development and support programs have varying degrees of impact in preparing principals for the work of leading urban schools effectively. This study sought to explore what novice principals valued in their mentoring programs. As such, it employed social learning theory, self-determination theory, and adult learning to frame the knowledge base. A review of the background and elements of mentorship programs is also reviewed, as a framework.

### **Social Learning Theory**

According to Thyers and Myers (1998), social learning theory explains human behavior as “what a person does, regardless of the observable nature of the phenomena” (p. 36). Bandura (1971), known as the founder of social learning theory, asserts that “virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experiences can occur on a vicarious basis through observation of other people’s behavior and its consequences for them” (p. 2). This theory promotes the importance of modeling and underscores how individuals often feel unprepared for the workplace.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory posits that people have an inherent growth tendency (Vallerand, 2000) and asserts that peoples’ innate psychological needs must be met first to foster self-motivation. Porter and Lawler (1968) suggest the work environment be restructured so that effective performance enables both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. These components together lead to better job satisfaction. In education, self-determination theory applies to different cultural

and institutional contexts and strives to understand and predict what energizes, directs, and sustains behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2009).

### **Adult Learning Theory**

Adult learning theory is a popular and often utilized theoretical framework (Morris, 2019). Knowles, founder of adult learning theory, defines it "as the art and science of helping adults learn" (Merriam, 2001, p.5). This work was derived from the inquiry of whether adults could learn, especially compared to their younger counterparts (Merriam, 2001). Framed in behavioral research and learning theory, Knowles was the first to construct adult learning as different from child learning (Merriam, 2001). Knowles argues that adult learning theory is comprised of a set of working assumptions which Holton et al. (2001) explains as:

- adult learners need to understand the purpose of learning,
- there needs to be a correlation between adults' self-concept and a move toward self-direction,
- a learner's prior experiences are essential and provide rich resources for learning,
- readiness to learn hinges on adult learners being faced with a performance task or life situation,
- adults' orientation to learning is life-centered, and
- adult learning is internal and self-directed.

These six assumptions were constructed to best explain how adults learn in the workplace.

These theories share characteristics that validate the context of learning in collaboration rather than isolation and together frame the need for a supportive and reassuring learning environment.

Augustine et al. (2016) suggests that "having someone to share issues and concerns in a confidential setting is paramount to the new principal's success" (p. 10). To that end, time must

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be provided for new principal mentees to observe veteran professionals in their work, experience both internal and external motivators to continue growing in their practice, and understand their learning needs as adults. According to Crocker & Harris (2002), working closely with experienced mentors positions novice principals to find success as they embark on their leadership careers. This underscores the importance of districts adopting and implementing principal mentoring programs for principals.

### **Mentorship as a Framework**

There is evidence that connects effective school leadership and student achievement (Dutta & Sahney, 2016). To support the instructional leadership of novice principals, an inherent need for effective mentors has led to the research, and development of principal mentoring programs across the nation. Considering the complicated work Hoy and Miskel (2013) describe as “feverish and consuming” (p. 428), a new principal must learn early how to manage effectively. A systemic and structured support system is vital to sustaining a beginning principal's success. Augustine et al. (2016) asserted that “principals need high quality mentoring and professional development in their first year accompanied by contextually specific strategies to understand the values of the school community and serve the school community effectively” (p. 11). Professional development is key to a school leader’s success because “school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning” (Leithwood et al., 2020, p. 5). Scholars agree that school leadership positively influences teaching and learning and is vital to the success of school improvement efforts (Hattie, 2008; Seashore Louis, 2010). With the expectation that a shift is made from principal as manager to instructional leader, it is critical that aspiring principals become more centered on leading learning communities that facilitate change (Crocker & Harris, 2002). To this end, the literature supports the argument that mentorship, by

effective veteran principals, plays a critical role in strengthening school leadership (Gumus, 2019).

### **Elements of a Mentorship Program in K-12**

Gumus (2019) investigated a K-12 mentorship program implemented in Georgia. Mentorship in this study designed for elementary and middle school principals was an integral part of the novice principal's professional development and facilitated by an experienced principal. Gumus (2019) suggested that this opportunity was the most significant type of professional development. In Georgia, the mentorship program prioritized specific characteristics that mentors should possess to qualify for the mentorship program. Qualities identified as significant for mentors to possess include good listening skills, strong communication skills, reflectiveness, and compassion. Mentor training was also an essential component of Georgia's principal mentoring program (Gumus, 2019).

One successful indicator outlined by Georgia's systemic plan was a decreased feeling of isolation by the mentee. A reduced sense of isolation could be attributed to the mentee's responsibility to schedule monthly on-site visits with their mentor. The mentee also had unlimited access to their mentor, with the autonomy to call or text their mentor whenever they had a question or encountered a challenge. An evaluative component of the systemic plan included a pre-survey administered to the mentees to determine their areas of strength and weakness. Information from these surveys were then used to inform professional learning opportunities for the mentee and strategic action plans were developed on topics such as evaluation, school achievement, data analysis, time-management, and instructional leadership. Together, the elements of this mentorship program provided necessary supports for novice principals.

## Methods

In this case study we sought to understand experiences of eight novice principals who participated in a first-year principal mentoring program. We were specifically interested in which elements of the program they perceived prepared them well for urban school principalship and how they perceived their relationship with their assigned mentor. To best explore the novice principal's perceptions of their program and relationship with mentors, two general questions guided the study:

1. What elements of the principal mentoring program were identified by principals in the program as preparing them for the principalship in an urban district?
2. What was the perception of a novice principal's relationship with their district assigned mentor in a principal mentoring program?

### Study Participants

Purposeful sampling based on specific criteria was used. The principals needed to be practicing leaders at the elementary school level, having had recently completed the district's mentoring program. To ensure a wide and diverse pool of applicants, participants were sought from different regions within this large Mid-western urban district. Participant recruitment began during the summer of 2020. Following IRB and the Urban district's approval, the district Superintendent's designee identified ten elementary principals to participate in the study. An email sent to these principals yielded eight administrators willing to participate in the study. All participants represented the initial criteria of: 1) being an elementary school administrator, 2) having participated in the program within the last three years, and 3) serving in various regions of the urban district. Table 1 details additional participant demographics.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Years Removed From Program
A	M	3
B	F	1
C	F	2
D	F	2
E	F	1
F	F	2
G	M	3
H	F	1

*Note.* In an effort to maintain integrity and anonymity within a small sample size, participant races are not identified in conjunction with gender. The identified participant racial composition was two (25% Caucasian), with one identifying as Latinx-non-black, and six (75%) African American or Black. The percentage of Black administrators is high when compared to the 19% as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Characteristics of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in the United States: Results From the 2015–16 National Teacher and Principal Survey First Look (NCES 2017-071) retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017070.pdf>. It is important to note that while this report is the most current, it does not disaggregate elementary principals from secondary. The number of urban elementary principals could be higher than 19%.

Although no personal connections existed between the researchers and participants, and no one was in an evaluative position over the participants, the researchers (as described in Table 2) did serve as mentors to novice principals and had participated in mentorship programs to varying degrees.

**Table 2***Researcher Descriptions*

Researcher	Race	Gender	K-12 Experience	Credentials	Mentoring Experience
#1	Black	F	Teacher, Administrator, Ed.D. in Ed Admin	Urban Principal	Principal for three Urban Schools  Mentor to Novice Urban Principals
#2	Caucasian	M	Teacher,	Suburban Principal	Developed a suburban district's

			Administrator, Assistant Professor, Ph.D. in Ed Admin	Superintendent	new leaders mentor program  Official mentor to five head principals and eight assistant principals  Director of secondary education mentoring and overseeing eight high school and middle school principals  Head principal overseeing new hires
#3	Black	F	Teacher, Administrator, Associate Professor, Ph.D., in Ed Admin	Urban Principal Superintendent	Urban Leadership Cadet Program  Assistant Coordinator of Summer Superintendent Program  7 years as head Principal overseeing new hires in three urban schools

These multi experienced perspectives brought professional teacher and administrator practitioner understandings to their roles as (seasoned) researchers.

Several additional measures were adopted to address the problem of undermining the study with bias or justifying interpretations to intentionally employ trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell, 2014). To maximize trustworthiness Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria were established during the research process: credibility, described as the researchers confidence in the truth revealed in the results, transferability, described as the degree to which the results

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were applicable in other contexts, dependability, described as consistent and repetitive results, and conformability, described as results that were objective and shaped by the participants' narratives rather than the researchers' bias. Prioritizing these criteria served as an impetus to setting a fair and equitable environment for all participants throughout the study.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection began in August (Autumn semester) of the following academic year. In light of COVID-19 safety protocols, and with respect for the principal's time and capacity, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Zoom provided transcription useful for analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via a virtual platform, each lasting approximately one hour. Participants reviewed, discussed, and signed consent forms prior to starting their interviews. To maintain research quality, participant responses were transcribed and then member checked (Charmaz, 2014; Glesne, 2016) for accuracy. Triangulation was achieved through interview member check, coding, and data comparison for validation.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis began in December and results were verified in March. Each of the eight participants (described in Table 1) were interviewed once. After interviews were conducted, the transcripts were analyzed. To initiate the process, researchers collaborated in review of the transcripts. In this initial process, codes were created. Applying an iterative coding process (Maxwell, 2012), researchers read through the transcripts multiple times refining and verifying the coding scheme until codes were mutually exclusive (Creswell, 2014). After the initial manual coding, the qualitative analysis software program NVIVO (QSR International, 2020) was used to compare codes. Researchers reviewed both manual and software codes to identify patterns in analyses. These patterns led to the development of common (emergent) themes across participant

interviews. As themes emerged, the findings were connected back to the research questions undergirding this study.

## **Findings**

While the study was guided by the questions designed to explore what elements the principals perceived prepared them for urban principalship and what they perceived as valuable in their relationship with their mentor, the second inquiry was addressed in the exploration of the first. Essentially, the mentees appreciated and valued the quality time spent with their mentors as they sorted out challenges presented in their first year. This section details the five emergent themes participants found to be important reflective of the main inquiry of the study. Novice principals benefit from a) formal mentoring programs, b) quality time with mentors, c) mentors with strong leadership experience, d) mentor guidance with executing district policies and procedures, and e) a positive relationship with mentors that includes open communication.

### **Formal Mentoring Programs**

Understanding experiences of a novice principal is key to identifying the elements of a quality principal mentoring program. This information is key for districts as they craft principal mentoring programs in large urban districts. The consensus among participants was a formally structured mentoring program would be more beneficial than an informal mentoring model. Based on participant responses, a formal mentoring program should include objectives, goals, and timelines. For instance, one participant shared, “I was just told that I would have a mentor, but there was never an orientation at the start of the year.” The participant expressed the absence of a formal structure created more challenges as a first-year leader. Regardless of participant gender or number of years removed from the program, novice principals agreed that a program’s

objectives, goals, and timelines should be clearly communicated during the orientation process to increase their understanding and maximize program effectiveness.

### **Quality Time with Mentors**

Quality time, described by participants as availability to one's mentor when needed, was a common barrier discussed by novice principals during the interview process. Novice principals identified a significant responsibility of the mentor was to ensure the novice principal had adequate time with them. When time between the mentor and the mentee was compromised, the capacity to manage day-to-day building challenges was cited as an obstacle. The study also underscored that novice principals who spent more time with their mentor described a better work-life balance. This was corroborated by one participant who expressed, "Having more one on one time with my mentor was needed. A balance between outside work, lack of follow through from the program itself, and the consistency was a weakness." This was significant to a novice principal's first year on the job because work-life balance, according to participants, promoted a healthier outlook on the principal role. To this end, novice principals who were satisfied with the amount of time they spent with their experienced mentor felt more productive on the job.

### **Mentors with Strong Leadership Experience**

Understanding that school leadership is a significant factor contributing to what students learn at school, supports the importance of an effective principal in every school. In addition to principal training programs, being paired with mentors with strong experience as effective urban school leaders had a direct impact on first year principals and emerged as a key element to a quality mentorship program. This study's findings uncovered a mentor model was essential for today's urban novice school leader. All the participants expressed a significant benefit to having

an experienced mentor to guide and support them during their first year on the job. This sentiment was described by one participant, “Having my mentor see me in my first-year setting was helpful to meeting my individual needs as a first-year principal.” Participants cited how important an experienced mentor was to a novice principal’s confidence in their new role and attributed to their increased understanding of being an urban school leader.

Mentors with a plethora of leadership experience are also positioned to give constructive feedback. All participants spoke passionately about how critical the experienced mentor’s guidance was on the novice principal’s leadership development. One participant shared how mentor feedback influenced her ability to maximize her leadership potential, “I could then ask for feedback on what I could do as a mentee to grow and where I should focus my time. I felt that was really useful.” All participants expressed the significance of an experienced mentor’s feedback to meet the demands and challenges of the urban school leader. Feedback provided to a novice principal increased the mentee’s effectiveness in the role, improved their level of confidence, and positively impacted their growth and development.

### **Mentor Guidance with Executing District Policies and Procedures**

Information leading to an increased understanding of district policies and procedures emerged as a significant element to a quality mentoring program in this study. Findings emphasized the responsibility of experienced principals to inform novice principals on school system policies and procedures as a priority. Novice principals spoke passionately about the need to understand district policies and procedures, extant of gender or number of years in the role, in order to effectively navigate their job responsibilities. One participant stressed, “The mentoring program helped me to learn operational procedures of the district like in-school suspension, attendance, and enrollment procedures.” Novice principals who felt ill-informed on district

policy cited difficulty in managing the responsibilities of a first-year urban school leader.

Additionally, lack of access to district resources, including digital binders and monthly to-do lists, was identified as a workplace stressor.

Participants' responses revealed a desire to be provided resources that kept them abreast of upcoming deadlines and promoted task-oriented leadership skills. "Access to an elementary digital binder or timeline of important events would have strengthened the mentoring program's objectives," one participant explained. It was evident that unclear expectations of district policies and procedures posed a challenge for novice principals and was cited by participants as a barrier to responding proactively to the daily demands of the principalship. An experienced mentor able to provide novice principals with information on important policies and procedures was discussed by participants as critical to promoting autonomy and independence in the workplace.

### **Positive Relationships with Mentors that Includes Open Communication**

Most participants talked positively about their work environment in association with a positive relationship with their mentors. Participants' indicated relationships with their mentors had a major impact on their first-year experience. Relationships, described by participants as a positive, professional working relationship with an experienced mentor were essential to the success of the novice principal. Novice principals described a more positive attitude when paired with a supportive mentor. One principal captured the essence of her relationship with her mentor stating, "We were mutually supportive of each other." Novice principals who felt supported by an experienced mentor also shared a feeling of longevity in the principalship.

A positive mentor and mentee relationship helped novice principals feel more prepared to handle the demands of the job, accomplish short-term goals, and continue a level of excitement about future growth in the role. Novice principals in the study talked about how a positive

relationship with their district assigned mentor exceeded expectations and eventually transitioned from a professional relationship to a personal relationship. Lastly, although not a standalone theme, the importance of communication, described by participants as open and consistent, was nested under positive relationships between mentors and mentees. Participants expressed how important it was for them to be able to communicate their challenges to their mentors so in-turn those mentors could help support the development of leadership skills in more explicit ways. For instance, one participant stated, “I could just pick up the phone to talk with my mentor at any time.” This open line of communication was key for participants to work through challenges in a timely, and safe, manner. In conclusion, participants who experienced consistent and open communication with their experienced mentor appeared to have a better outlook on their first-year principal assignment and seemed more confident in their perceived level of preparedness to meet the job responsibilities.

### **Concluding Discussion**

Literature on the benefits of principal mentoring programs underscore a positive relationship between principal mentoring programs and instructional leadership (Augustine et al., 2016). Educational reform initiatives that include principal mentoring programs are integral to the development of novice urban school leaders. While this study adds to the literature supporting transformative learning and mentoring in the principalship, its relevance lies in the fact mentoring is a critical component of preparation and can have a positive impact on an aspiring principal’s learning process (Bickmore et al., 2019). They furthered that “few researchers have explicitly examined the benefits to practicing principals engaged in mentoring aspiring principals” (p. 235).

The findings of this study suggest that if urban school districts want to ensure principal effectiveness sustainability over time, districts administrators should consider requiring novice principals to participate in first year principal mentoring programs to support their growth as leaders. Specifically, the mentoring program design should incorporate careful mentor selection, e.g., mentors with strong leadership experience and able to specifically support mentees execute district policies and procedures, and allow for the organic positive relationships that develop with open communication and dedicated time. Requiring novice principals to be mentored in this way could not only decrease principal turnover, noted as a national problem, but also increase the number of applicants interested in urban school district leadership (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). It would most certainly and ultimately better inform and equip urban principals' sustainability and career trajectory, from the beginning.

Note: This article represents the doctoral work of Dr. Rhonda Nichelle Peeples. Dr. Peeples was a Columbus City Principal who passed away unexpectedly during the publication process.

Knowing Nikki's dedication and passion for this topic, Drs. Beard and Miller worked on this manuscript for publication to posthumously honor Nikki and all of the good she brought to bear on K-12 urban education in the state of Ohio.

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