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The Elementary Assistant Principal: Exploring Mentorship as a Development Pathway for the Principal Job Role

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The Elementary Assistant Principal: Exploring Mentorship as a Development Pathway for the Principal Job Role

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenographical article was to explore the different ways that elementary assistant principals experienced mentoring from their elementary principals as a way to provide the requisite leadership development that would lead them to become a principal. This research study was conducted using in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data source. Ancillary data sources such as demographic surveys, reviewing district leadership secondary source documents, and researcher journal notes aided in the data triangulation and analysis. This study was guided by one main research question: What are the different ways elementary assistant principals experience mentoring from their elementary principals? The research question posed allowed participants to illuminate their lived experiences about how elementary assistant principals experienced mentorship directly from their elementary principals. The prominent themes that emerged from the data were: a) assistant principal leadership development, b) principal leadership development, and c) mentorship perceptions.

Keywords

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

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Introduction

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

While the predominant literature emphatically declares the principal's role and impact as an indispensable factor in the success or failure of a school, researchers Harris and Spillane (2008) also argued that effective principals are those who understand the importance of distributive leadership. These researchers posited that a principal's primary responsibility involves their “explicit and intentional use of distributive leadership, particularly with their assistant principals, to help establish the structures necessary to ensure a school is on a trajectory for success” (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 31). The role of the assistant principal is often referenced as the second in command in the hierarchy of school leadership (Marshall & Hooley, 2006), but according to Glanz (1994), often, the

assistant principal is the "forgotten man" (p. 283) in school leadership. Despite the overwhelmingly existing literature that speaks to the significance of cultivating and increasing the skill set and capacity of a principal's leadership, researchers also claim that exploring the assistant principal's leadership development is still an area within school leadership that needs further discussion (Glanz, 1994; Kwan, 2009; and Olesewski et al., 2012).

The role and leadership development of an assistant principals has been overlooked in the empirical research and yet is one of the most censorious job roles within a school that should be examined further (Davis et al., 2005; Glanz, 1994; Louis et al., 2010; Young et al., 2002). Holmes (1999) argued that assistant principals have become an integral and vital part of school leadership, but their leadership pathway remains imprecise. As the literature continues to express, the development of strong school leaders is a crucial component for the success of a school, and a part of this development involved understanding the leadership development of an assistant principal (Clifford et al., 2012; Dickens et al., 2021; and Turnbull et al., 2016).

The purpose of this article is to explore the lived experiences and conceptions that elementary assistant principals have about the mentorship received from their elementary principals through the lens of phenomenography (Marton, 1994). Furthermore, this study investigated the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals who desire to become a principal one day. It is

acknowledged that not all assistant principals aspire to become a principal. Therefore, this study only focused on those elementary assistant principals who expressed the aspiration to advance their leadership role to the rank of becoming a principal. This phenomenographical study addressed one main research question: What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principal' experience mentoring from their elementary principals? This study analyzes the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals and how mentorship allowed them to develop the necessary skills required for a principal's role. In the following sections a review of the relevant literature is presented as well as an overview of the conceptual framework guiding this work. Next, research methodology as well as the findings of the study are offered. Lastly, the discussion, implications for research, and the conclusion are discussed in detail.

Review of Relevant Literature

The assistant principal position is most often the necessitous step in a school leader's career advancement when the aspiration is to become a principal. Yet, while this role outwardly serves as the ideal apprenticeship to becoming a principal, research has continued to indicate this leadership role as one of the most impenetrable roles within education (Shoho, 2012; Oliver; 2005; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Reed & Himmler, 1985 Workman, 2013). According to Ribbons (1997), the AP position is a "difficult role to sustain in a school where other leadership roles seemed to be overshadowing it" (p. 298). Similarly, Glanz (1994)

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

Historical Overview of the Literature on the Role of the AP

To fully understand the role of the assistant principal (AP), it is quintessential to understand the evolution of how the AP emerged in education. The AP position did not evolve as a part of school leadership from the beginning of schooling in the United States (Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971). The emergence of this role grew from the drastic changes that began to occur in education during the 20th century, such as school enrollment, increased number of teachers, and the general education services that schools started to provide for students (Glanz, 1994; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Mertz and McNeely (1999) posited that the role

of the AP grew out of a need for efficiency to support the ever-increasing enrollments schools faced during the 20th century with little emphasis placed on how this role would effectively serve as an additional school leader to the principal. Earlier studies indicated that the AP position's purpose was to support principals with the growing tasks required to run a school environment (Glanz, 1994; Greenfield, 1985; Harvey, 1994; Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971).

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

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

The AP often recognized as a school leader who carries out fortuitous tasks as assigned by the principal has continually spurred intellectual discussions among scholars about the relevance of this position and its influence on school leadership (Hillard & Newsome, 2013; Stein; 2006; Weller & Weller, 2002). Early researchers posited that the role of the AP evolved because the school principal needed relief from the many daunting administrative tasks that was now becoming a part of the work required for a school leader (Glanz, 1994; Kindsvatter & Tosi, 1971). Researchers such as (Austin & Brown, 1970; Glanz, 1994; Harvey, 1994; and Van Eman, 1926) have notably made seminal

contributions exploring the APs role and have described this role as a leader without clear direction or a solid focus on affecting the overall academic achievement in a school. Despite the prevalence of research that exists exploring the AP, extant research continued to profess a need for additional studies exploring the APs unique role and particularly their leadership development to understand how these school leaders receive adequate leadership preparation (Glanz, 1994; Greenfield, 1985; Harvey, 1994; Marshall & Greenfield, 1985; Peters et al., 2016).

According to Harvey (1994), the AP position serves as a direct support person to the principal. Similarly, research by Glanz (1994) supported the description given of an AP by Harvey (1994), but also extended the discussion and argued that the primary duties and responsibilities delegated to APs are menial in scope and do not lead to enhancing their overall leadership development. Glanz (1994) also contended that the AP position materialized from a need of principals recognizing that additional support would be beneficial for supporting the daily management, administrative, and operational needs in a school (Oliver, 2005). While this role seemingly fulfilled the immediate requirement for school support, research has steadily maintained that principals continued to negate this position as a pathway opportunity for advancing the leadership skillset of APs that aids in developing their leadership prowess (Gillespie, 1961; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Oliver, 2005). Collectively, researchers

such as (Armstrong, 2009; Greenfield, 2009; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Moore, 2009; Reed & Himmler, 1985) all agreed that defining the role of an AP remains vacillating and a significant degree of ambiguity exists when trying to understand how APs receive ongoing leadership development while in this role. It was not until around the mid-1950s that research began to precipitate an interest in understanding the role and functionality of the AP within schools (Gillespie, 1961). Panyako and Rorie (1987) surmised that before the 1950s, the historical context of school leadership focused primarily on the school principal. These researchers presented an argument that suggested the leadership of the principal referred to as the “chief executive officer” within a school overshadowed the AP position, which made the AP an “invisible” member among the school leadership team (p. 6). One implication from the analysis of Panyako and Rorie (1987) later established by Glanz (1994) posited that research continued to affirm the role of the AP as the “*forgotten man*” in school leadership and there exists a need to investigate additional aspects of the leadership development provided to APs (p. 283).

Even more disputed is the acknowledged research that adamantly declares an obligation to advance the discussions about the role of the AP and how their leadership development enables their readiness to become a principal (for example Marshall et al., 1994; Jayne, 1996; Oliver, 2005; Owen-Fitzgerald, 2010; Webb & Vulliamy, 1995). By using this research, which generally focused on the

lack of leadership preparation or training development afforded to APs, we can begin to establish the existing gap that currently exists in the literature about the development of the AP role. In summary, the research discussed unequivocally declared the need to approach the investigation of the AP from the stance of seeking to gain a more in-depth perspective about their leadership development and experiences that sufficiently or insufficiently prepare them for the role of the principal.

Understanding the Role and Functionality of Assistant Principals

According to Harvey (1994), the AP position serves as a direct support person to the principal. Similarly, research by Glanz (1994) supported the description given of an AP by Harvey (1994), but also extended the discussion and argued that the primary duties and responsibilities delegated to APs are menial in scope and do not lead to enhancing their overall leadership development. Glanz (1994) also contended that the AP position materialized from a need of principals recognizing that additional support would be beneficial for supporting the daily management, administrative, and operational needs in a school (Oliver, 2005). While this role seemingly fulfilled the immediate requirement for school support, research has steadily maintained that principals continued to negate this position as a pathway opportunity for advancing the leadership skillset of APs that aids in developing their leadership prowess (Gillespie, 1961; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Oliver, 2005). Collectively, researchers

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Interestingly, Mertz and McNeely (1999) and Weller and Weller (2002) contended that while the assistant principal's role seemingly addressed the immediate call for school support, there remained unclear expectations about how this role universally operates within schools. Previous studies have indicated that the work of the AP primarily encompassed tasks that focus on school operations and lack a shared duality of responsibilities of all school leadership aspects with the principal, particularly instructional leadership (Glanz, 1994; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Weller and Weller, 2002; Kwan 2009). Notwithstanding the continuance of this position within schools, research has emphatically argued that minimal studies exist that explicitly catechize how APs receive the necessary leadership advancement training or experiences from their principals (Busch et al., 2010 as cited in Oleszewski et al., 2012; and Kwan, 2009). The Assistant Principal job responsibilities are shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Assistant Principal Job Responsibilities*

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

Assistant Principal Professional Development

The professional development of an AP is a crucial part of their overall

leadership growth. According to Marshall and Holley (2006), very few school districts provide the necessary professional development for APs that aid in increasing their overall leadership abilities. Additionally, there is a dire need for the continuation of professional development opportunities that enhance the current expertise of principals while also preparing the next group of rising school leaders that one day will transition into the principalship role (Johnson, 2004; Olson, 2008; Wallin, 2006). Moreover, the increased call for educational leaders to enhance their proficiency in instructional leadership has now sparked a demand for school leaders with an improved dexterity around instructional leadership (Barnett et. al, 2017; Burch, 2006; Olson, 2008, Wallin, 2006). Research conducted by Kearney and Herrington (2013) suggested that a widely known gap exists between what APs need to increase their leadership development versus current professional development opportunities provided to APs that lack all required instructional focus areas to meet the current educational demands. Lastly, the research literature affirmed that professional development solely from a university-level preparation program lacks the necessary sufficiency to support the growing developmental needs for an AP (Enomoto, 2012; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Walker & Qian, 2006).

Marshall and Hooley (2006) further contributed to the conversation regarding AP development by stating that building principals must utilize

intentional methods and provide an assistant principal with the needed opportunities to sharpen their leadership abilities. The intentionality behind developing an assistant principal's leadership skills reinforces existing literature that asserts effective school leadership encompasses contributions from members of a school's leadership team, which includes both the principal and assistant principal (Aguilar, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2010). Nakai (2005) further suggested that principals use a systematic approach to undertake the development and training needs of their assistant principals. More specifically, these researchers declared that the focus of leadership development involved providing assistant principals with opportunities that not only enhance their leadership skills but are also opportunities designed to engage both assistant principals and principals in a shared learning experience.

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

argued that principals must ensure that their APs receive the appropriate training and leadership development that positively influences the teaching and learning outcomes for students in schools.

Comparably, the work of Nieuwenhuizen and Brooks (2013) also asserted that the primary role relegated to the position of an AP merely consists of tasks related to general school management. These researchers identified that APs spend a considerable amount of time dealing with managerial tasks focused on school and student management. Also, Retelle (2010) posited that principals who focused on developing their APs do so by providing assistant principals with leadership experiences. By providing ongoing leadership development, the principal then serves as a coach or mentor and supports assistant principals in synthesizing their learning. Patterson et. al (2012) also stressed that a principal's crucial responsibility is to ensure that they develop their assistant principals by providing robust experiences to strengthen their leadership development. These researchers reinforced the viewpoints of Retelle (2010) in recognizing that mentorship is a decisive element that principals utilize to further build the skill set of an assistant principal. Payne and Huffman (2005) also agreed that mentoring is a way of cultivating an individual's ability, enhancing their skills and orients them to their specific job role and responsibilities. In summary, incorporating mentorship as a practice of leadership development is a strategy that Fullick-

Jagiela et al. (2015) referred to as the opportunity to teach, grow, and broaden the skills of an individual within any organization.

Conceptual Framework

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

In formulating the theoretical perspective for studying the mentoring experiences of elementary assistant principals, both Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) provided a useful construct for advancing the main ideas that drove this research focus. SLT and LMX both have components akin to the epistemological assumptions of constructivism, a fundamental theory founded on observation, and the scientific study about how individuals learn (Merriam & Carafella, 1999). A noteworthy tenet of

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

Methodology

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

Moreover, the research approach of phenomenography was used to explore this topic. Phenomenography, as a research approach, is a relevant methodology to use when a researcher seeks to examine and analyze the different ways in which an individual experienced a specific phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Utilizing a phenomenographical approach to explore this topic was appropriate because the essence of exploration involved understanding the different realities that elementary assistant principals and elementary principals have about mentorship (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Major & Savin-Baden, 2013).

In addition, this qualitative study investigated if there are similarities or differences in the emerging perceptions that elementary assistant principals and elementary principals had about the role of mentorship and its influence on developing the leadership skills for elementary assistant principals. The results from this study contributed to the body of research aimed at providing a more in-depth examination of the role of the assistant principal, perceptions of mentorship, and the influence that mentorship has on the leadership development for elementary assistant principals. This phenomenographical study focused on the following research question: What are the different ways in which elementary assistant principals' experience mentoring from their elementary principals?

Context

This research study took place in one school district, located in the Southeast region of the United States. This site was used because of accessibility and access to participants by the researcher. The city where the school district is located ranks as one of the top 40 metropolitan cities in the United States and is one of the top 10 largest cities in the southeast region. This school system has an active enrollment of around 40,000 students attending 98 learning sites, including two-single-gender campuses and 17 charter schools. This school district has experienced increased achievement in student growth and performance over the past six years. According to statistical data collected by the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA, 2020), this school district has a student enrollment of more than 40,000 for grades K-12. The demographics of this district are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

School District Demographic Information

Characteristic	% of Student Enrollment
Race/Ethnicity:	
Black/African American	75%
White/Caucasian	15%
Latino/Hispanic	7%
American Indian, Asian, or Multi-Racial	2%
Exceptionality:	
Students with Disabilities (SWD)	22.3%
English Language Learners (ESOL)	2.9%
Limited English Proficient	5%

Early Intervention Program K-5 (EIP)	27.4%
Remedial Education Program 6-12 (REP)	16%
National School Lunch Recipient	77%

Participants

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

Table 3

Participant Profiles (n=8)

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Years of AP Experience	Years of Principal Experience	Years working with Principal	Years working with Asst. Principal	Degree Level
AP Roger	M	AA	25-34 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Specialist
AP Lauren	F	AA	35-44 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Specialist
AP Naomi	F	AA	25-34 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Masters
AP Charlie	M	AA	45-54 Years old	1-3 years	N/A	1-3 years	N/A	Specialist

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

There was a total range of educational leadership experience spanning from 1-15 years between all eight participants. Specifically, participants with 1-9 years of school leadership experience represented 87.5% of the sample. The participants with 10+ years of experience represented 12.5% of the sample. All participants provided their racial background. One hundred percent of the participants identified as being African American. Four participants, or 50%, were female, and 50% or 4 participants were male. All eight of the research participants self-reported their highest level of education. One participant, or 12.5%, reported that he/she has an earned master's degree. Fifty percent or four participants reported they had a Specialist of Education degree. Three or 37.5% of participants reported having earned a doctoral (terminal) degree. The age of all participants fits between the pre-identified age group of 18-55 years of age.

Data Collection

The researcher utilized criterion purposive sampling to solicit research participants for this study. Patton (2002) described purposeful sampling as appropriate in qualitative research when participants are knowledgeable about or have encountered the phenomenon in question. The researcher incorporated participant-sampling strategies that included clear objectives that

aligned directly with the goals for this study (Palys, 2008). Bernard (2002) emphasized that purposeful sampling is a useful method for participant selection when an individual is willing to participate and can communicate their experiences expressively and reflectively. For the context of this study, the participants selected were current elementary assistant principals and elementary principals. This study included interviewing five elementary assistant principals and three elementary principals. The participants were selected through criterion purposive sampling to establish variations in the participants' experiences to the phenomenon analyzed in this study (Palys, 2008; Trigwell, 2006). This study used three types of primary data sources: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) researcher notes, and (3) a review of district leadership documents. The rationalization for using these data sources was to elicit the lived experiences and conceptual understandings of how elementary assistant principals experienced mentoring by their elementary principals. According to Vagle (2018), the incorporation of multiple data sources helps the researcher to identify better the conceptual understanding of the investigated phenomenon from each of the research participants.

Procedures

For this study, semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method employed. The use of interviewing as a data collection provided this researcher with multiple opportunities to explore the perceptions of the participants to determine the variations in the experiences that participants hold of the phenomenon during the data analysis review. The generation of interview questions were open-ended and focused on the research question of the mentoring experiences that elementary assistant principals have received from their elementary principals. To ensure the confidentiality of each participant, a pseudonym was given to each

participant. Participants had the option to self-select their pseudonym or receive a randomly assigned pseudonym.

Data Analysis

The data collection for this study included interviews that are audio-recorded, transcribed in their entirety, and converted to text-based documents using Rev.com, a trustworthy and confidential transcription service. ATLAS.ti Version 9 (Berlin Software Development, 2013) was used to organize and analyze the collected data. Atlas.ti Version 9 is a qualitative research software package designed for qualitative researchers to code their research studies.

The data analysis for this research study included incorporating aspects and strategies discussed by Creswell (2014), which were adapted after Moustakas's previous work (1994). This research study included the following: (1) utilizing tables and graphs to illuminate data analysis; (2) using quotations to support analysis findings; (3) providing an in-depth discussion to the research question; and (4) illustrating the significance of the research findings from the participants of this study (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013; Creswell, 2014). Additionally, data collection, including all interviews, field- notes, and any district documents (as applicable), were included for data analysis and reduction. Lastly, the researcher used open coding to develop themes and identify categories and concepts from the research participants. Also used was an anticipated data reduction matrix to further help with the organization of any additional research details that emerged from this research. Accordingly, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested including an anticipated data reduction matrix helps the researcher highlight aspects of data pertinent to your research topic. Using this strategy also highlighted data points that do not align with your research focus.

During the data analysis process, different conceptualizations that participants' attach to the phenomena explored were identified. Recognizing the differences in conceptions helped to establish the basis for understanding the qualitatively different viewpoints of the participants' experiences in the outcome space (Collier-Reed & Ingram, 2013). Akerlind (2005) suggested that establishing descriptive categories emerging from the participant's conceptualizations is the critical process a qualitative researcher uses to inform the discussion about the structure of how the particular phenomenon influences one's experience and understanding about the phenomenon in the "outcome space" (Akerlind, 2005, p. 323). In phenomenographic research, the outcome space provides the researcher with an opportunity to examine the phenomenon from the integrated perspectives in how each participant experiences and makes meaning of the phenomenon under study (Akerlind, 2005). More specifically, the outcome space, during data analysis, involved analyzing the responses of each participant in a logical manner to establish a set of commonalities of differences in the perceptions and experiences each individual has about the phenomenon investigated (Marton, 1981).

Strategies to Ensure Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is frequently measured against criteria more aligned for a quantitative researcher (Creswell, 2013). Guba (1990) outlined a more naturalistic approach for qualitative researchers to use when measuring the trustworthiness of their research findings. Along these lines, four distinct criteria have been established in qualitative research to determine the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability. First, credibility refers to having credence in the results of the research findings (Payne & Williams, 2005). To form credibility, the researcher: (1) spent time

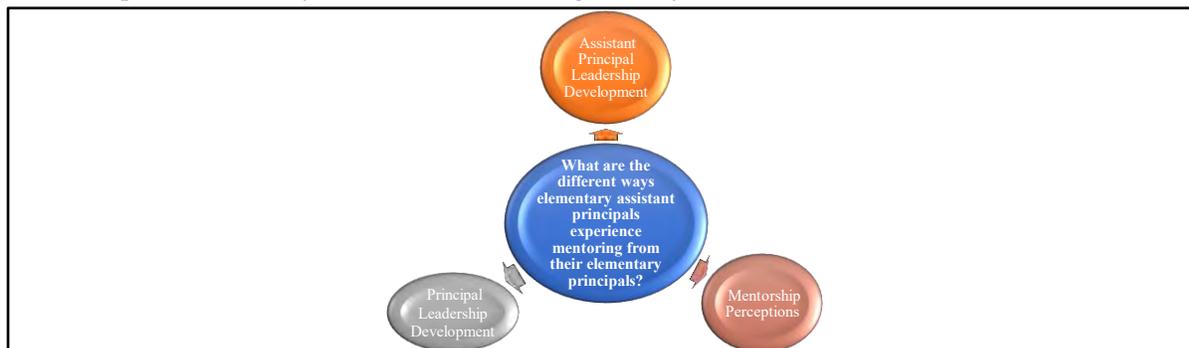
establishing rapport with the research participants prior to engaging in the interview process; (2) triangulated data using interviews, researcher notes, and reviewing secondary source documents related to the phenomenon under investigation; (3) developed thick descriptions of the phenomenon through descriptions of the context and participants; (4) provided research participants' with the opportunity to review the accuracy of the interview transcripts and withdraw from the study at any time, which included before, during, or after their interview; (5) integrating a diverse population sample, which provided a variety of insights and enhanced the overall collective perceptions of the phenomenon explored. To establish transferability, the researcher provided thick descriptions of the interview data to allow the findings to be transferred from the context being explored to the researcher during analysis. The researcher provided dependability by: (1) describing in-depth a description of the research methodology and data analysis procedures; and (2) utilizing member checking to review and ask questions to assess the accuracy of the research findings (Gonzalez, 2010). Lastly, confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality and value of the research findings (Creswell, 2013; Guba, 1990). The notion of confirmability is insistent on the degree to which the research findings are influenced by the participants and not inclusive of any researcher bias. The researcher affirmed confirmability by: (1) engaging in member checking throughout the data analysis process; (2) providing a detailed description of the research methodology used to analyze participant findings; and (3) integrating data triangulation through interviews, researcher notes, and reviewing secondary source documents.

Findings

Results for this phenomenographical study were gathered during eight participant interviews. As described in Chapter 3, participant selection was based on a criterion to ensure that this research study could capture the lived experiences of the phenomenon being investigated from the personal accounts of the study participants. Creswell et al. (2007) noted a fundamental purpose for conducting qualitative research involves the researcher identifying a sample population who is familiar with or who can share a personal account from the phenomenon being probed. The participant interviews resulted in three distinct emergent themes: Assistant Principal's leadership Development, Assistant Principals' Experiences of Principal Leadership Development, and Assistant Principals and Principal's Mentorship Experiences. All three emergent themes are directly linked to the research question that guided this research study. Within those three emergent themes, subthemes also appeared and assisted in the disaggregation of the research findings. The visual representation of the prominent categories are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

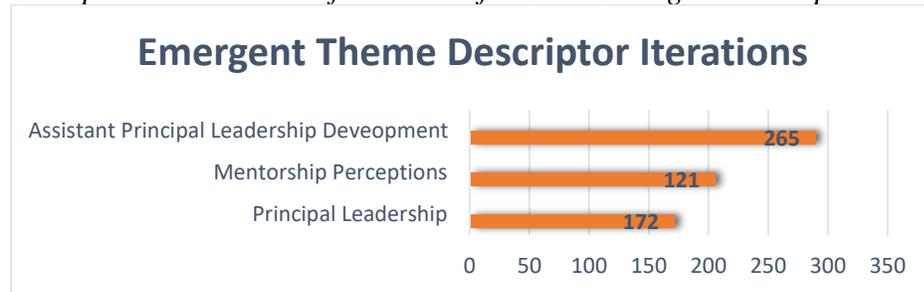
Visual representation of the Prominent Categories of Themes



Furthermore, an examination of the data is illustrated in Figure 2. Figure 2 characterizes the total number of iterations for each emergent theme of description used in this study. Thick descriptions and triangulation of data sources that helped support this phenomenographical research study's credibility and trustworthiness are also incorporated. Hence, through the interpretation of the data analysis process, a more in-depth analysis of the lived experiences and different ways that elementary assistant principals received mentorship from their elementary principals is shared.

Figure 2

Example Total Number of Iterations for Each Emergent Descriptor Theme



Theme 1: Assistant Principal's Leadership Development

Assistant Principal's Leadership Development was the most prevalent theme and *centered on the experiences that assistant principals shared about their leadership development within their current role*. All research participants talked about a myriad of responsibilities associated with an assistant principal's job role and provided very explicit examples of how this work-related directly to his/her own leadership development within their current job role. Additionally, the experiences that participants shared revealed that an elementary assistant principal's leadership development is multi-faceted and unique to the specific roles and leadership responsibilities afforded them directly from their elementary principals. When

analyzing participant responses around the theme of assistant principal leadership development, AP Lauren declared: “sometimes I don’t feel like my assigned tasks are preparing me for the role of the principal because most times, principals don’t do these jobs.” Participant, AP Naomi, shared a belief that “50% of the knowledge you learn within a school setting contributes to your overall readiness for a principals’ role”. What is more, this district’s job description for the role of an assistant principal expressed clearly that an assistant principal is to “consider him/herself as an apprentice to the principal.”

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

able to lead weekly data meetings. As AP Charles conveyed, his personal leadership developed focused primarily on the ways and opportunities he has to experience different leadership responsibilities. All assistant principal participants universally exclaimed that understanding the school budget is a quintessential part of the leadership development of an assistant principal.

AP Roger reported that his leadership growth and development has centered on how he and his principal continually work together as “thought-partners” when leading their school. AP Roger believed that the partnership between a principal and assistant principal in many ways is more important than the level of leadership exposure an assistant principal receives daily. Furthermore, AP Roger also expressed numerous times that the relationship component between a principal and assistant principal is almost as important as an assistant principal's being exposed to variety of leadership tasks. AP Roger also described the relationship between a principal and assistant principal as a "marriage" where both individuals have to work daily to establish and maintain a high degree of trust and is an ongoing process of getting to know one another. In comparison, AP Rylee maintained during her interview that she appreciated how her principal allows her to take “risks” without being micromanaged. She emphasized that she feels a large contributor to her leadership development stems from her principal's ability to challenge her thinking by "questioning" her rationale for a lot of the decisions she makes as a school leader.

Theme 2: Assistant Principals’ Experiences of Principal Leadership Development

Assistant Principals’ Experiences of Principal Leadership Development emerged as the second most prevalent theme from these research participants. This theme addressed principal leadership style from the lived experiences that elementary assistant principals and elementary principal's participants shared during their interview. Both elementary assistant principals and

elementary principals shared insight into how instructional leadership and being afforded responsibilities in this area of school leadership is a critical component for developing the skillset of an assistant principal for a principal's job role. The sub-themes that emerged from this major theme included: (1) Principal Leadership Style and Experiences and (2) Instructional Leadership.

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

The AP participants expressed that principal leadership development contributed greatly to their confidence as they continue to grow in their own leadership development. They repeatedly remarked that their principals were encouraging, provided opportunities, and were supportive. Equally, the principal participants echoed sentiments of wanting to serve as a coach to their assistant principals. Principal Luck illuminated an outlier perception when he shared, "Your assistant principal must know why they want to become a principal." One central conception emerging around this theme, which is discussed later but, as respondents dialogued

about their experiences of principal leadership, it became evident that principal leadership is a significant factor in developing an assistant principal's skillset.

Sub-Theme: Principal leadership style and experiences.

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

Among the elementary assistant principal's responses, they described that they perceived the leadership style and perceptions they have of their elementary principals as one that helps to develop and advance their current leadership. Also, elementary assistant principal participants made connections to their principal's leadership style and experiences they hold about them through the lens of communication, mentoring, or mentorship behaviors they have experienced. For example, AP Rylee affirmed, "but specifically with my principal, I think I'm really being mentored well, because she doesn't shut me out, and her leadership style is collaborative. I know that I have experienced from other APs that they really don't have a good working relationship with their principal, and they are shut out of a lot of things." AP Naomi remarked during her

interview that her principal practiced effective communication between them. More precisely, she recounted, "So she communicates very frequently, and, um, efficiently." (Interview, October 2020). In affirmation, AP Roger recalled, "I think what has also helped is he shows me what to do."

Sub-Theme: Instructional leadership.

Findings among these groups of elementary assistant principals showed that they engage in instructional leadership aspects within their roles. AP Charles noted that his instructional leadership experience spans from his direct involvement in leading specific grade levels. Correspondingly, AP Naomi highlighted that she had taken the initiative this year to work with teachers and lead some professional development sessions. AP Lauren's experience around instructional leadership highlighted that she has only recently gotten the opportunity to engage in more instructional activities because her priority has focused heavily on school operations. Several participants shared experiences around instructional leadership and even provided examples. Specifically, AP Charles noted: "My principal and I share different grade level teams to support instruction." In a like manner, AP Rylee remarked: "I am given the charge to lead from an instructional standpoint with teachers. This is a much different experience for me from my first year as an assistant principal." Both AP Charles and AP Roger affirmed: "I am involved in facilitating weekly data meeting with my assigned grade levels." Similar to the other assistant principal respondents, AP Naomi also conveyed: "My principal helps me out with school operations tasks so I can spend more time with instruction and supporting our teachers."

As an outlier from the other participant's experiences, AP Roger presented a unique perspective on instructional leadership when he discussed that there are mutual learning and

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

Theme 3: Assistant Principals and Principal's Mentorship Experiences

The theme of Assistant Principals and Principals' Mentorship Experiences focused on how each participant viewed mentorship, and how mentorship supported the leadership development and relationship cultivation between an assistant principal and principal. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that each participant had a personal view about mentorship and how the cultivation of a mentoring relationship is established between an elementary assistant principal and an elementary principal from each participant's personal experiences. The sub-themes that emerged from this major theme included:

(1) Mentoring relationship cultivation and (2) Mentoring personal definition.

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

AP Roger eloquently phrased his experiences of mentorship as a “marriage” between two individuals with levels of understanding, commitments, and vulnerability. AP Rylee’s response stood out to the researcher because of her body language. During her interview, this researcher noted that AP Rylee used more voice inflection, and her demeanor illuminated a greater level of enthusiasm as she described the multiple ways, she and her principal worked together to form a relationship not only rooted in her leadership development, but also taking time to learn more about each other personally. As an example, AP Rylee illuminated: “My principal is really one of the best principals in this district. She and I text each other every day and she always want to make sure I am in a good place with my work.” AP Lauren, AP Naomi, and Principal Luck collectively shared similar sentiments that mentorship is an opportunity for an assistant principal to engage in leadership tasks and have a safe space where feedback is given and received to bolster personal growth. Principal Obama echoed that mentorship really involves understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the person you are mentoring but remaining aware that you should provide opportunities to capitalize on an individual’s strengths. A reflection shared from Principal Margo is that mentorship is a relationship whereby two individuals become “thought partners and not afraid to share ideas, thoughts, or ideas.” Generally, this reflection in some ways captured the collective understanding that all participants attached to their individual understandings of mentorship.

Sub-Theme: Mentoring relationship cultivation.

One of the most significant themes emerging around the relationship cultivation around mentorship identified that this relationship is a cyclical process, whereby both individuals provide ample contributions to the development of this relationship. Many of the elementary

assistant principal participants described mentorship as a two-way relationship that involves both individuals contributing to how the relationship develops and how it continues to grow over time. AP Roger mentioned that his principal told him, “I am not going to treat you how his principal treated him.” AP Rylee and AP Naomi both referenced mentorship as an “informal and formal way to learn from one another.” Even adding that over time, you can actually become friends with your principal because of this relationship. This respondent made a point to discuss how the relationship between he and his principal is one of genuine respect and care for one another. AP Naomi related how she leverages mentorship as her opportunity to get feedback from her principal regarding how she leads other staff in their building. An example, she recalled, “I go to my principal to always get feedback on my feedback to others.” Moreover, this individual also shared that because of the relationship she has cultivated with her principal, she is equally able to provide feedback to her principal as well about different things that may come up in regard to their shared leadership. The majority of principal respondents made a point to highlight that communication was the most critical element of how the mentoring relationship forms and is sustained between an assistant principal and principal. Principal Obama explained communication is quintessential for him because “I have to know what my assistant principal knows or what they do not know, and this is only established through strong communication.”

Sub-Theme: Mentoring personal definition.

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

AP Naomi experienced mentorship as means to “build a strong and trusting relationship with someone” where I am given some space to reflect on my practice and grow. AP Rylee commented that mentorship to them is the chance to “see, mirror, and learn” from a seasoned leader. Principal Obama believed that mentorship involves your ability to learn new “perspectives” from others. He further recalled learning from a veteran principal who really invested in helping to shape his leadership development. AP Charles’s shared his belief that mentors and mentees both work together to build trust and respect. He describes how a mentor is someone who should “take you under their wings and show you the nuts and bolts” of school leadership. While all participants provide an individualistic perspective about how they define mentorship, the findings spotlighted a few key sentiments across all participants, which were: coach, confident, and supporter. Additionally, there was an expressed notion that mentorship is defined as a mutual exchange between two individuals who commit to providing an investment in one another.

Discussion

Conceptually, this study is guided by two distinctive theoretical orientations: Badura’s (1977) social learning theory (SLT); and Uhl-Bien and Graen’s (1995) leader-member exchange theory (LMX). The integration of this theoretical-conceptual framework provided a foundation for understanding how the dyadic relationship between an elementary assistant principal and elementary principal concurrent with the leadership experiences and mentorship that elementary assistant principals receive from their elementary principals would prepare him/her/them for a principal’s role. The use of this theoretical-conceptual framework was valuable in understanding the differing perspectives that these elementary assistant principals illustrated as they conveyed

how the mentorship provided by their principals advanced their leadership skills for a principal's role. More importantly, this framework provided a more robust approach to understanding how mentorship as a way of leadership development prepares an elementary assistant principal with the necessary skills and behaviors required for a principal's role. Specifically, applying SLT to aspects of the relationship cultivation existing between an elementary assistant principal and their elementary principal, interpretations derived highlighted if an elementary assistant principal experienced a positive or negative outcome space in how they conceptualized their lived experience of the phenomena Investigated. Findings from this study highlighted some perspicacious feelings that these elementary assistant principals felt were fundamental in correlating how they believed their leadership development advanced through the support provided by their principals. A few extracted reflections that participants summarized, which elucidate the correlation between SLT, and their lived experiences of leadership development were described as follows from the respondents: AP Lauren emphasized: "I believe my principal is now attempting to prepare me to become a principal by giving me various responsibilities so I can see all aspects of leadership" (Interview, October 2020). Principal Obama expressed: "I really capitalize on the strengths of my AP and push them to grow in areas where they are not always comfortable."

These congruous insights reinforce how SLT can frame how an individual conceptualizes their leadership development and to what extent this development is reinforced through the direct experiences that one is exposed to within their environment. Even more, many of the feelings conveyed by the participant are closely aligned to what Rotter (1954) asserted as vital when exploring the role of *expectancy* as a condition of SLT. Rotter's (1954) stance of expectancy

centered on how the intensity of the engagement one receives in his/her/their environment stimulates conditions that enhance feelings of value attached to specific tasks or experiences. Furthermore, this feeling of *value* as Rotter (1954) defined it is also closely associated with how one also attributes a greater sense of motivation, which ultimately drives the behavior(s) that one regards towards a specific skill or task. In this study, elementary assistant principals discussed how their *responsibilities* not only provided them with leadership development, but also bolstered a curiosity which spurred a desire to seek out new learning to support their continued growth as a school leader.

To illustrate, during AP Lauren's interview, she discussed her desire "to learn more about how the school budget works." Her cognizance/awareness around this aspect of her leadership development provided a space where she felt safe enough with her principal to have a conversation about her desire to learn additional skills. AP Charles also recognized that school budgeting is an area where his current leadership experience is limited. As he noted: "I have no experience with the school's budget and this year my principal said she is going to give me some areas of the budget to learn because I need to learn this." This insight also demonstrates how SLT can influence behaviors, but more significantly, bolster the behavioral capabilities of an individual. Interestingly, the participants in this study addressed how the leadership experiences with their principals actuated internal revelations about their own leadership development, which produced behavioral insights from these elementary assistant principals about how their leadership needs could be further developed and supported directly by their principals.

Correspondingly, using LMX provided a framework to uncover the perceptions that elementary assistant principals held regarding the values they believed were germane for

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

Insights discovered by the participants focused on how mentorship was associated with feelings of mutual trust, collaboration, and commitment from both parties (mentor/mentee). AP Naomi illustrates: “I love that my principal is my mentor because I have a voice in my learning, and not just a blank canvas being filled. AP Naomi’s perspective supports what Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) described as ‘role-taking’ and ‘role-making’ in a dualistic transactional relationship established through the perspective of LMX. AP Naomi’s experience encapsulates how she perceives her mentoring relationship with her principal as one in where both parties show a mutual investment in how the relationship is cultivated and enhanced. Principal Obama explained that he values: “open lines of communication” as he outlined what he felt was an important trait in the relationship between a mentor and mentee. In all instances, participants emphatically reinforced that a viable mentoring relationship stemmed from how you viewed the relationship and the efforts that both parties contribute to develop and cultivate this *authentic* relationship. Through examination of the three data sources, three descriptive categories emerged: (1) assistant principal leadership development, (1) principal leadership style, and (3) mentorship perceptions. These descriptive categories support answers to the research question.

Thus, the findings reviewed in chapter five will be organized by each emergent theme related to the overarching research question for this dissertation study.

Limitations

One limitation that is evident in this study was the duration of this research project. An additional limitation is the fact that the researcher is a current elementary assistant principal within the school district under investigation. Furthermore, a limitation of this study is if this study were replicated, would the research findings have the same or similar outcomes? The sample size of this study was also a limitation. Although smaller sample sizes are preferred for qualitative research and the participants were identified through purposive sampling, it is plausible that a larger sample size would have yielded rendered more variation in participant experiences and responses. In exploring the mentoring experiences that elementary assistant principals received from their principals, there is no way to generalize these findings to the experiences of other assistant principals. This study only looks at elementary assistant principals within one large school district.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

The findings in this study indicated that the role of an elementary assistant principal is still varied and a multi-faceted school leadership role, but there are benefits to elementary assistant principals receiving mentorship from their elementary principals. Participants in this study illuminated that they felt that mentorship provided them with a layer of leadership support as they grow in their leadership roles. Moreover, findings also indicated that the participants

believed that they were supported and experienced additional leadership opportunities that helped to prepare them for a principal's role.

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