

A formal administrator mentoring program: Perceived learning benefits and insights into leadership well-being

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Abstract.

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

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

1. Introduction

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

& David, 2007; Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Blum-Destefano, 2018; Villani, 2006; Wardlow, 2008).

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

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

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

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

2. Theoretical Framing: Adult Learning through Social Activity

Mentoring, as a form of professional learning for novice school administrators, calls on the social-constructivist theory of adult learning. As such, there is an emphasis on experiential learning and knowledge as commonly established through inquiry, observation, experience,

participation and practice (Clark, 2001; Dewey, 1933; Engestrom, 1994; Engestrom, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Loughran, 2003; Orland-Barak, 2010; Tillema, 2005).

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

Mentoring situates itself within a model of adult learning that emphasizes learning as self-directed, experiential, and involving critical reflection by individuals who are motivated and ready to learn (Brookfield, 1995; Huang, 2002; Knowles, 2005). Construction of professional knowledge is initiated and sustained through ongoing, progressive discourse among colleagues as they interpret work-related situations (Edwards, Gilroy, & Hartley, 2002; Orland-Barak, 2010). With this, learning is grounded in a defined historical-cultural social activity (Allen, Karanasios, & Slavova, 2011) that is interactive, collaborative, authentic, and learner-centered. Activity and experiences therefore construct meaningful knowledge in situ (Huang, 2002).

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

both hedonic aspects of feeling good (positive emotions) and more eudemonic (conducive to happiness) aspects of living well that entail experiences of positive relationships, meaningfulness in life and work, senses of mastery and personal growth, autonomy, and achievement (Keyes, 2002, 2003; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; Seligman, 2011). (Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019, p. 229)

3. Literature

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

Administrator mentoring programs increasingly appear to be supported by emerging research (Della Sala, Klar, & Lindle, 2013; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). In their research of a regional program created to support new administrators in southeast Ohio, Howley, Chadwick, and Howley (2002) found that new school leaders were asked to complete a

portfolio based on the former Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standards and that approximately 70% of participants ranked mentors as the most crucial component of the program.

Mentoring research also gives us insight into benefits gained by mentees. In a survey of 92 Massachusetts elementary principals that explored practitioners' perceptions on the benefits of principal mentoring programs, Rodriguez (2006) found that 90% of novice principals agreed that mentoring aided them in understanding their roles and responsibilities of their position, 98% of novice principals agreed that managerial support was a benefit of mentoring, 67% of novice principals agreed that mentors help a mentee learn the culture of the school, 86% of mentored principals agreed that mentoring can help a novice principal become a more effective instructional leader, and 87% of novice principals agreed that mentoring can help alleviate feelings of anxiety. In a qualitative multiple case study of principal support and induction practices, Bodger (2011) found that novice administrators welcomed the support they received from mentors. Specifically, mentees reported their mentoring relationship supported them in gaining confidence and providing opportunities to vent frustrations or obtain feedback. Furthermore, participants reported reduced stress, feeling less isolated and more effective in their jobs.

Upon completion of a structural analysis of more than 300 research-based articles on mentoring, Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004) found that mentoring has enormous potential to bring about learning, personal growth, and development for professionals. The most commonly cited positive outcome for mentees was related to support, empathy, encouragement, counseling and friendship (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004).

Mentors become a critical partner in working toward the success of a new administrator. Research conducted by Aslbury and Hackmann (2006) and Chapman (2005) supports the idea that experienced administrators in the position of mentoring novice administrators gain significant benefits from participating in a reciprocal mentoring relationship. Taking on the role of mentor can breathe life into the career of a long-time educator. As with the mentee, mentors experience opportunities for reflection on their own behaviors, attitudes and values which may serve to strengthen leadership ability. Mentoring relationships may also reduce feelings of isolation felt by mentors by promoting the feeling of being a member of a productive and cohesive team (Playko, 1995).

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

4. Methods

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

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

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

The focus of this research was not on making predictions, generalization to a larger population, or finding causal inference, all tenets of quantitative research. Rather, we sought an understanding of the benefits experienced by key educators within the context of mentoring relationships through obtaining in-depth, detailed, thick description of expert and novice experiences and perspectives. For this purpose, empirical investigation using a phenomenological-like qualitative approach was best suited for our study. Understanding and appreciating the viability of the generic inductive qualitative model (GIQM) (Hood, 2007; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Maxwell, 2005;), a modified phenomenological perspective was employed for examining the mentoring relationship.

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

Preliminary data analysis with GIQM began with careful reading of the interview texts, relevant Missouri Administrator Mentoring Program documents, and researcher comments and ideas. Organizing text in this manner allowed for listing coded statements of meaning for participants and grouping these statements into meaning units that constituted a theme and/or conceptual category. The coding process consisted of searching for emergent themes or patterns such as conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, and feelings in order to find phenomenological patterns that stood out in the data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Throughout the data analysis, emerging themes and/or coding categories were compared to determine whether there were common language threads or meanings embedded in participant records. After all data had been coded and themed, a cross-participant analysis of the seven individual cases identified processes and outcomes that were similar and dissimilar to understand how experiences were qualified by local conditions and settings, and thus to develop a more sophisticated description and more powerful explanation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within the cross-participant analysis the differences and similarities across the mentee and mentor administrator participants was explored. A phenomenological textural description emerged from thematically organized meaning units. The textural description was then used in constructing a composite portrait of the mentoring experience.

5. Analysis and Findings

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

5.1 Perceived Learning of Mentees: Relational Communication

Communicating effectively with colleagues is of equal importance for novice administrators. The way in which an administrator communicates with colleagues is a significant factor in setting the tone and developing the culture at a school or in the district. Learning how to “work with people” was an important lesson for her mentee, Evelyn recalled. In fact, she believed her mentee made significant growth in this area. “Working with people” means leaders in education are often faced with having challenging conversations with their colleagues. Developing expertise and building a level of comfort involves practice and receiving guidance from more experienced administrators.

The success of a school or a district depends on a strong foundation of positive relationships with all stakeholders. Building these relationships can sometimes be a challenge for novice administrators. The ability to communicate effectively in order to develop important collaborative partnerships with colleagues, parents, and community members was identified by many of the participants as learning that occurred through ongoing dialogue

between mentors and mentees and authentic experiences facilitated within the context of the mentoring relationship.

5.2 Perceived Learning of Mentees: Time Management

When making the transition from being a teacher to an administrator, novices who participated in the study often struggled with anticipating their new responsibilities and planning ahead to accomplish newly acquired tasks. Because of the demands of the position, novice administrators often felt there was never enough time to accomplish everything that had to be accomplished. They often felt overwhelmed. Demands such as handling faculty and staff issues, custodial issues, cafeteria duty, and student discipline consumed much of the day. This left tasks such as required paperwork, curriculum planning and instructional leadership for after school, which began to cut into personal time. Many administrators expressed frustration at having to choose between staying at school to catch up on tasks or going home to spend time with family. According to participants, balancing the tasks required of an administrator with family time and personal care continued to be a challenge.

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

5.3 Perceived Learning of Mentees: Leadership

All administrators in this study believed that participants in mentoring programs learn about the demands of their job and how to be better leaders. Much of this learning was experienced as the result of critical reflection on their day-to-day actions and experiences. Many described developing an increased repertoire of actions as a leader. Understanding what it means to be an administrator, along with the tasks and responsibilities that must be accomplished, is an important part of role socialization for new administrators as they step into formal leadership positions. Several participants discussed the specific leadership skills they learned about. Much of the learning that occurred was experiential, meaning it happened as participants worked through real-life situations on a day-to-day basis. Other learning occurred through dialogue about day-to-day experiences.

5.4 Perceived Learning of Mentees: Situational Problem Solving

Administrators are faced with a multitude of situations on a daily basis for which they must decide the “best” course of action. As mentors support administrators through mentoring in context, mentees build their skills and ability to address the day-to-day challenges they face. During conversations a mentee might ask questions such as, “How do I handle this?” or “What would you do in this situation?” All study participants noted the learning that happened regarding various everyday situations such as discipline, grading or dress code issues.

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

5.5 Benefits of Mentoring as Perceived by Mentees and Mentors

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

5.5.1 Meaningful Professional Relationship

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

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

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

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

5.5.2 Catalyst for Professional Learning

This category is different than the perceived learning identified by mentees as described above. All study participants identified the professional learning that takes place within a

mentoring relationship as a significant benefit of participation in a mentoring program. Mentors noted they supported mentees in learning how to become an instructional leader, how to manage time, how to see the big picture and how to anticipate what was coming down the road. As many participants pointed out, there is a very real, steep learning curve that happens with new administrators. This view was held from both sides of the mentoring relationship.

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

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

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

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

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

Across the board, all participants recommended participation in a mentoring program as a way to become better administrators while living and doing better too. Mentors in the study agreed that the mentoring relationship served as a developmental learning experience for all involved.

5.5.3 Framework for Support

Administrators in their early years should never be left alone to succeed or fail. But this is often the reality, causing many new administrators to leave the field in a few short years (Militello, Gajda, & Bowers, 2009; Reames, Kochan, & Zhu, 2014). New administrators often lack confidence and are their own worst critics. They may become frustrated because there is so much to learn and they cannot learn it fast enough. They may become overwhelmed with the volume of tasks there are to accomplish. Stress can overtake the life of an administrator. Mentoring novice administrators through these early years provides a vital resource and

support system. With many administrators leaving the position in their first few years, mentoring provides a support system that keeps them in the field while curtailing hiring and attrition costs of the system.

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

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

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

5.5.4 Vehicle for Self-Reflection

Experience is necessary, but reflection is the true teacher. One of the most powerful strategies mentors can model is how to reflect. One of the biggest things administrators can learn is how to reflect on their practice, stepping outside oneself to carefully examine oneself. This aspect of self-enhancing insight is illustrated by one participant’s reflection about the possibilities available to him through continuous improvement:

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

Most of the study participants identified reflection within the mentoring relationship as a clear benefit. Robert indicated appreciation for structured reflection time: “to [look] back and think things through.

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

5.5.5 Drawback of Time and Instrumentation

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

6. Phenomenological Dimensions of Learning and Well-Being within Administrator Mentoring

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

Immersed in the reality of becoming a new administrator, at some point participants experienced a growing feeling that there was much about their new role that was unknown to them. This experience brought about other feelings, such as excitement about reaching a new goal, but also apprehension, self-doubt, and uncertainty about impending and unknown responsibilities in their future. Almost immediately participants felt a separation from their usual peers, other teachers, and began to experience the feelings of isolation often reported by school administrators (Bodger, 2011; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006).

Coupled with a state mandate that new administrators participate in a mentoring experience and recognition of the need for professional support in their new role as a school leader, participants intentionally sought out a forum for learning. The experience of learning in the initial period of being a new administrator brought about feelings of relief. Each new bit of information assimilated into their working schema meant they had gained knowledge that would help them be successful in their journey as a school leader. Gaining new knowledge provided opportunities for participants to refine, review, and build on new learning. But, gaining new knowledge also brought about feelings of being overwhelmed. Participants experienced the realization that there was so much more learning that needed to happen, but they did not necessarily know what exactly they needed to learn. They had the clear sense of not knowing what you do not know. Gaining knowledge in one area could trigger a panicky realization of the knowledge they did not possess. Taking in large amounts of new knowledge, day after day, consumed participants, leaving them wondering how they would learn everything they needed to learn. Sometimes they felt their brain was overflowing with new information and they couldn't take in any other piece of new knowledge. Weighing heavy on their minds was the fear of not knowing something and making a mistake.

As learning continued, participants experienced an intermittent sense of accomplishment as they used their new-found knowledge to tackle everyday situations. They experienced a sense of accomplishment when they retrieved new knowledge to help them maneuver through a situation or make a decision. At the same time, they continued to have realizations of gaps in their knowledge. Specific situations would shine a spotlight on their lack of knowledge. These

experiences and resulting realizations highlighted the need for them to continue learning. The same experiences and realizations also motivated them to continue learning.

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

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

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

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

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

The belief that an essence exists within the lived experiences of people who have progressed through a similar situation is the foundation for creating a composite portrait of a phenomenon. Even as individual participant's experiences vary in relation to learning as a phenomenon, when considered altogether, their experiences reveal a common reality throughout the structure of their learning experiences. Textural and structural descriptions are blended into a final composite portrait of experience as rendered below.

All participants in this study experienced the common phenomenon of gaining new knowledge and dispositions through learning and that learning contributed to their overall

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

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

7. Discussion

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

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

Throughout the mentoring process, ongoing, supportive dialogue between the mentor and mentee established a level of trust, which laid the foundation for a meaningful learning experience. Much of the learning was experienced as the result of critical reflection on the part of the mentee regarding day-to-day actions and experiences. Job-embedded, authentic, and interactive learning experiences such as teacher observations or participating in classroom walkthroughs together were instrumental in developing new knowledge and skills of novice

administrators. Often new learning happened as a result of conversations between mentees and mentors in which mentors shared ideas, interpretations of situations, and best practices. Mentees would then work to implement a strategy or practice and follow up with their mentor with continued reflective discussion.

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

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

7.1 Summary of Study Findings

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

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

The experiences of the participants indicated they learned how to be better problem solvers, especially in instances involving policy and procedure. There was a steep learning curve when making everyday decisions. Participants reported learning about how to handle issues such as student behavior, discipline, and dress code. There was also learning about how to handle issues with teachers, such as student grading practices and teacher dismissal. All participants reported learning how to solve problems related to policies and procedures as a

direct result of their mentoring relationship. These findings tie back to the importance of viewing the learning and well-being of novice principals through constructivist, social activity explanations.

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

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

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

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

7.2 Study Findings and the Empirical Literature

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

school leader. To build capacity for instructional leadership, mentoring as a form of sustained, job-embedded support may be fundamental in assisting new administrators (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Davis, Darling-Hamond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Peterson, 2002).

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

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

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

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

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

Vriesenga, 2004), the authentic learning experiences in mentoring programs are seen as a natural vehicle for making these links (Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

Similar to findings in other research, participants in this study reported that a lack of time was a drawback or difficulty when participating in a mentoring relationship (Clayton, Sanzo, & Myran, 2013; Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). When novice administrators are feeling time pressures while handling conflicting priorities, it can be more difficult to maintain a focus on the mentoring relationship.

8. Implications for Policy and Practice

Improving student achievement continues to be an urgent focus in the U.S. and throughout the world. Second only to highly effective teachers in the classroom, effective school leaders have the most influence on student achievement than any other related school factors (Leithwood et. al., 2004). We must pay careful attention to leadership development, providing the necessary support and opportunities for professional growth, including mentoring for new school leaders. The practice of mentoring as a form of professional development is well documented in the literature across many fields (Higgins & Thomas, 2001; Kay & Wallace, 2009; Laband & Lentz, 1995; Varkey, Jatoi, Williams, Mayer, Ko, Files, Blair, & Hayes, 2012). The findings from this study of a state-mandated mentoring program indicate the nature of learning that takes place, as well as the benefits to well-being for participating in such a program. These findings have implications for school districts, universities, state departments of education, and state legislatures.

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

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

The findings of this study imply a need for closer relationships between universities and local school districts. There still remains a gap between the manner in which school leaders are prepared in university programs and the reality of their day-to-day responsibilities once

they assume their new position. Potential school leaders need not only a theoretical foundation of school leadership, but also an equal understanding of the nuts and bolts of being a successful school leader. Leading and managing are both important skill sets for a novice administrator. Through strong partnerships, universities and local school districts can prefigure incumbent mentoring with a renewed focus on internship experiences that privilege the importance of practice knowledge and job-embedded learning for aspiring administrators.

If schools and their systems are serious about meeting the academic needs of our children and raising students to higher levels of achievement, we must create a practice of collaboration. State legislatures, state departments of education, universities and school districts can potentially work together to create a culture of support for education and its school leaders (Gray et al., 2012).

Professional development support for new school leaders, including mentoring programs, is currently in place in many states and school districts. Even so, the existence of a mentoring program provides no guarantee that new school leaders will gain the skills and wisdom necessary to be an effective leader. In order to develop and implement effective mentoring programs to support future leaders it is important to understand whether there is meaningful learning currently taking place in established programs and if new principals' general well-being is being taken into account.

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

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