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## What Makes an Efficacious Elementary Principal? A Qualitative Study

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WHAT MAKES AN EFFICACIOUS ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL?

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

By

Rebecca C. Meyers

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Kay A. Keiser

Omaha, Nebraska

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WHAT MAKES AN EFFICACIOUS ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL?**

#### **A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

Rebecca C. Meyers, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2020

Advisor: Dr. Kay A. Keiser

Quality induction programming for novice principals should promote experiences that build self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007). Critical induction experiences are necessary to prepare school leaders for the increasing demands of the role. In the ever-changing world of public education, the importance of high-impact experiences for new principals has never been more critical than it is today.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences that develop feelings of self-efficacy in novice elementary principals. A descriptive approach was used to examine the perspectives of seven practicing elementary principals at various stages of their careers. Results from the study suggest feelings of self-efficacy increased when study participants described experiences related to four themes: Collective Teacher Efficacy, Positive School Culture, Supportive Relationships, and Emotional Self-Awareness.

High-impact actions are offered as recommendations to increase principal self-efficacy, including prioritization of district-specific principal performance standards, continuous evaluation of principal induction programming, and a systematic review of principal mentoring programs. Additional conclusions and recommendations are included and may provide insight for school districts who strive to create effective

induction programming for novice principals interested in elevating their own professional development.

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## **LIST OF MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The role of the school principal is increasingly complex. School principals are expected to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to succeed in a variety of roles, including instructional leader, visionary, change agent, budget specialist, curriculum and assessment expert, disciplinarian, public relations director, communications consultant, facility supervisor, and legal expert (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). While serving in these complex roles, the ultimate expectation of a school principal is to insure the learning of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students. The impact of school leadership on student achievement is second only to the effectiveness of teachers (Davis et al., 2005; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Mitgang, 2012). Of note, a meta-analysis on school leadership skills found a strong leader can improve student achievement by 19 percentile points (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Quality leadership is key to the continuous improvement of schools; over the past few decades, school districts have seen a decrease in the number of quality leadership candidates. Reasons for shortages have been widely investigated and various factors are to blame, including large numbers of retirements and fewer educators choosing to enter administration as a profession (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Marks, 2013; Russell & Sabina, 2014). Moreover, Hargreaves and Fink (2012) presented additional factors including increased demand and urgency to improve underperforming schools and the insufficient numbers of capable, qualified, and prepared candidates.

Increasing responsibilities, job stress, and high accountability in today's schools are turning certified, trained candidates away from administrative roles. State and national mandates, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (2015), create high stakes accountability placing leaders at risk of failure. Today's principals must facilitate continuous growth in student achievement, close achievement gaps, improve attendance rates, increase graduation rates, decrease drop-out rates, and increase college and workplace readiness for all students, especially the disadvantaged. Careers are at risk and federal sanctions are possible for schools not meeting expectations (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Insufficient pools of prepared, qualified, and capable leadership candidates are a growing concern and are forcing school districts to face shortages on their own.

School districts must take an active role in ensuring building leaders are prepared for today's challenges. In addition to a lack of funding, insufficient literature is available to support individual school districts as they scramble to ensure their novice leaders have the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed. While a variety of exemplary, innovative pre-service programs are showing promise across the country, these high-priced programs are funded through government grants and non-profit groups, such as school improvement grants and The Wallace Foundation, a philanthropic organization whose efforts strive to support school districts to prepare their leaders for the challenges of the principal role.

### **Professional Standards**

Experts in the field of educational leadership, partnering with The Wallace Foundation, showcase efforts toward improving school leadership through their work

with the Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI). A key component of their work is the requirement for school districts to use standards to guide professional practice (Gates, Baird, Master, & Chavez-Herrerias, 2019). Performance standards for professional practices communicate common expectations and guide leadership development. Standards that emphasize instructional leadership, school improvement, and change management bridge theory to practice and offer evidence of positive effects on principals' knowledge, skills, practices, and job success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Professional standards for school principals have evolved over the course of the last few decades. At the national level, the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium first established leadership standards in 1996 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). In 2015, the ISLLC standards were updated and renamed as the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). Greater emphasis was placed on evidence-based student learning outcomes and actions administrators should take to support the continuous improvement of learning in schools. Ten domains represented the core leadership responsibilities and included: Mission, Vision, and Core Values; Ethics and Professional Norms; Equity and Cultural Responsiveness; Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment; Community of Care and Support for Students; Professional Capacity of School Personnel; Professional Community for Teachers and Staff; Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community; Operations and Management; and School Improvement (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

In the State of Nebraska, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) established its Principal Performance Framework in 2011 with updates in 2017. Aligned to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, Nebraska's Principal Performance

Framework identified eight practices of effective school leaders: Vision for Learning; Developing Relationships; Continuous School Improvement; Instructional Leadership; Staff Leadership; Systems Management; Culture for Learning; and Professional Ethics and Advocacy (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017).

While the prioritization of student learning is paramount, principal standards continue to emphasize the importance of a wide variety of duties and responsibilities necessary for job success. Based on so many demands, it is potentially impossible for a new principal to enter a position with the knowledge and skills necessary to excel at the job. Certainly, a novice principal might exhibit strengths among some professional performance standards while requiring development in others. Consequently, a novice principal's feelings of success and confidence would more greatly developed in some professional standards than in others. Feelings of success in one's own ability to do the job, or self-efficacy, impact a novice principal's feelings of effectiveness and success in a new leadership role.

### **Self-Efficacy**

The central phenomenon of this study is the construct of self-efficacy. This emerges from Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977, 1986, 1993) and refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Bandura identified four domains that develop self-efficacy: (1) mastery experiences, the successful completion of particular tasks; (2) vicarious experiences, learning through observing the experiences of others; (3) social persuasion, learning from mentors who believe in one's ability to successfully complete specific tasks; and (4) psychological arousal, the positive or negative outlook

toward completing a specific task. According to Bandura (2010), “The most effective way of creating a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences” (p. 1). For the purposes of this study, experiences will include practical knowledge, skill, or practice resulting from direct observation of or participation in events or activity (Merriam Webster, 2020). Causal thinking and one’s ability to control personal experiences guide practices that promote self-efficacy.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Guiding school principals toward experiences that lead to self-efficacy and assisting school districts in developing efficacious school principals are critical actions to meet the increasing needs of today’s school principals. The Principal Leadership Development Framework was developed to address growth of the individual principal and to provide school districts a pathway toward designing leadership programming for principals (Hall, et al., 2016). The Principal Leadership Development Framework “establishes a clear and concise picture of effective leadership, expressing the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and actions necessary for success in the principalship. In essence, it provides a clear target for educational leadership excellence” (Hall, Childs-Bowen, Pajardo, & Cunningham-Morris, 2015, p. 4). When principals have a clear understanding of actions that lead to successful experiences, feelings of self-efficacy can be an end result.

The Principal Leadership Development Framework was first developed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) in 2008. As the ISLLC standards evolved over the years, ASCD’s leadership framework was also refined with specificity placed on the role of the school principal. Both the Professional

Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) and the Nebraska's Principal Performance Framework highlight the extensive responsibilities and critical skills of the principalship. In alignment with the PSEL and the Nebraska Principal Framework, the Principal Leadership Development Framework provides focus and clarity for principal development by emphasizing four high-impact roles of the school principal, including (1) Principal as Visionary; (2) Principal as Instructional Leader; (3) Principal as Engager; and (4) Principal as Learner and Collaborator (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2016).

Further, the Principal Leadership Development Framework outlines two pathways toward developing school leaders. The first pathway focuses on the growth and development for individual leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and aspiring leaders. The second pathway focuses on school districts' design of sustainable leadership development programming to meet the needs of individual leaders (Hall et al., 2016). This study used the Principal Leadership Development Framework as a framework to explore the leadership experiences critical to developing principal efficacy in elementary principals in a midwestern, suburban, public school district.

### **Purpose Statement**

Principal induction programming has traditionally been a one-size-fits-all approach and may not fit the diverse needs of new building leaders. Novice principals require experiences that provide growth in a variety of professional standards and these experiences can vary from one principal to the next. Additional research was imperative to uncover methods that match the needs of novice principals to professional performance standards and the Principal Leadership Development Framework. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the leadership experiences



critical to developing self-efficacy in elementary principals in one midwestern, suburban public school district (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Principal efficacy is operationally defined as a judgement of a principal's ability to determine a course of action to produce desired or intended outcomes (Bandura, 1997). A principal's efficacy beliefs are most malleable in early learning opportunities; as such principal induction programs should promote mastery experiences and practices that develop principal efficacy as a number one priority (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

### **Research Question**

With dwindling pools of qualified leaders, high stakes accountability measures, and budget constraints in public school districts, high impact experiences are essential in the professional development of novice leaders. Therefore, the research question for this study is: What are the experiences that help novice elementary principals improve self-efficacy?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study adds to existing literature by exploring experiences that lead to feelings of self-efficacy in elementary principals. Additionally, this study provides insight to school districts in promoting intentional experiences that produce principal efficacy. By addressing the complexity of the principal role and the diverse knowledge and skills required of the position, this study provides merit for novice principals, school districts, district-level leadership, human resources departments, principal mentors, principal preparation programs, leadership development programs, higher education, and lawmakers.

For new principals, identifying practices that influence feelings of self-efficacy may lead to a greater focus on individualized professional development. Upon entering a role with such expansive job responsibilities, the identification high-impact experiences allow a new principal to prioritize learning. Bringing focus to such a complex role affords the new principal with a sense of purpose and provides direction in seeking resources and support.

For school districts and district-level leadership, implications from this study can directly impact organizational learning, including student achievement, district budgets, succession planning, and culture. According to Leithwood (1995), it is essential for school districts to foster the district's vision, mission, culture, policies, practices, and resources through organizational learning. Efforts to develop individuals are not sustainable unless the efforts are aligned to the organization's goals (Brown & Chai, 2012). By differentiating experiences based on the needs of individuals, school districts may save precious time and resources and foster organizational learning.

In addition, effective leadership and principal induction programs can be used as valuable recruitment tools to benefit human resource departments. Use of effective and efficient induction programming can promote feelings of positivity, value, and a sense of a partnership between the principal and school district. Moreover, trusting relationships can be developed between and among principals and central office administrators. Beyond that, human resources departments can gain a better understanding of specific actions, which lead to principal efficacy, benefiting all aspects of a principal's development.

Conclusions from this study can impact principal mentors and support organizational learning. Implications of this study can guide professional development initiatives, including principal mentoring programs, toward providing experiences which promote self-efficacy. Additionally, the exploration of complex issues and varying perspectives can lead to new learning for the mentor principal.

For higher education programs, partnerships with school districts support a greater understanding of the needs of local school districts. Through this collaboration, leadership programs can be strengthened as theory is linked to practical, impactful learning experiences, which can lead to efficacious principals. By understanding ways to promote principal efficacy, higher education programs can increase their effectiveness and thus become increasingly in demand for educators interested in school leadership.

States can continue to play a vital role in the process of developing school leaders by adopting rigorous principal standards to guide leadership development programs (Shelton, 2011). However, it is not enough to acknowledge the need for high quality preparation programming, as states must influence the quality of leadership training through the use of standard setting. In that effort, states can impact program accreditation, principal certification, and financial support for highly qualified candidates. All in all, implications from this study can lead states to consider policies and actions that promote critical growth in novice school leadership.

### **Organization of the Study**

The study is organized in five chapters. Chapter two introduces literature relevant to this study. The approach and methodology of the study is presented in chapter three. Results are reported in chapter four, and chapter five shares the findings based on themes

that emerged from individual interview questions, which were developed using the conceptual framework. Chapter five also discusses findings from the research and provides analyses and interpretations of the findings, recommendations, and implications for future practice.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Supports for novice principals can vary from one principal to the next. The complexity of the role and the wide range of skills critical for success must be considered in the creation of principal induction programming. According to Wong (2004), an induction program focuses on meaningful, impactful professional learning and provides multiple support personnel and resources. Induction programs are investments in the novice leaders and the future of the school district. Literature reviewed will continue to build the case of the need for novice principals and school districts to identify experiences that lead to principal efficacy and thus inform principal induction programs.

While evaluation data from existing public school programs are limited, principal induction programs have traditionally met varying degrees of success. To support this qualitative study, existing literature was used to examine key design features of principal induction programs and to highlight current principal induction programming across the United States. Examining both quality components and existing principal induction programs provide foundational knowledge for public school districts who strive to develop effective programs with limited budgets. While one could argue exemplary preparation programs are worthy of investment, the key design features identified focus on actions for school districts who seek strategies to develop their own systematic principal induction programs with teaching and learning at its core.

#### **Key Design Features of Principal Induction Programs**

“Effective school leaders create vision, develop and support teachers and school staff, and strengthen school culture” (Shelton, 2011, p. 5). To hone these skills, novice

principals need opportunities and experiences that increase efficacy. Principal preparation and induction programs have historically been criticized as inadequate. Too many programs continue to fall short of preparing new leaders with the skills necessary to face the challenges and complexities of the role. Too often, programs fail at providing the learning and experiences needed to lead today's schools. Without question, school districts must invest in their futures today by training the leaders of tomorrow.

In a review of research on components of quality principal preparation and induction programs, four key design features emerged and are supported consistently throughout literature as evidence of fundamental program components. While these features can be interrelated, discussion regarding each component is critical to understanding the vitality of each component. Key design features of effective principal induction programs include:

- 1) Clear performance-based leadership standards;
- 2) Use of a cohort model;
- 3) High-quality mentoring;
- 4) Reflective practices

**Clear performance-based leadership standards.**

A key design element of an effective principal induction program is the use of leadership standards that promote clarity in performance expectations and guide essential aspects of principal development (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Clear standards provide focus to a role that is known for being overly broad and all-encompassing. Principal standards should identify measurable, performance-based criteria used to develop skills in each identified domain (Lauder, 2000).

The use of clear standards communicates performance expectations, aids in the identification of leadership strengths and performance gaps and assists in the pathway to improvement. The development of professional growth opportunities should be identified through performance on the standards (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Turnbull, Anderson, Riley, MacFarlane, & Aladjem, 2016; Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2015). According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) who developed the Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL) in 2015, leadership standards must be:

grounded in research and the real-life experiences of educational leaders, they articulate the leadership that our schools need and our students deserve...They're designed to ensure that educational leaders are ready to meet effectively the challenges and opportunities of the job today and in the future as education, schools and society continue to transform (p. 1).

Further, in a study of eight pre-service and in-service principal preparation programs, Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) concluded that use of professional standards which emphasized instructional leadership and school improvement prepared leaders to engage in effective practices. In addition, graduates of programs who used clear, performance-based standards reported higher rates of engagement in instructional leadership and organizational improvement than the national comparison group.

Clear performance standards should reflect the vision, goals, and needs of the school district. Few school districts have taken the time to create their own principal standards, instead relaying on broader state standards (Syed, 2015). Adapting state standards to meet the specific needs of the school district leads to alignment,

cohesiveness, and shared understanding. When school districts develop standards based on their local needs, they are explicit about the aspects of effective leadership they most value (Orr et al., 2010).

Common leadership standards promote a shared language within the school district organization. The practice of identifying clear standards is critical to all aspects of principal development, including shaping novice school leaders, mentoring and coaching, and principal evaluation (Manna, 2015; Orr et al., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2016). Through the use of common standards, school districts are able to articulate clarity in discussions of developing and evaluating performance expectations, which leads to an increase in principals with the skills and qualities necessary for success in the school district (Orr et al., 2010).

As the field of education changes, principal performance standards must adapt to these changes. Schools are different today than just 5 years ago. As students' needs, technology, and educational policies change, the expectations and responsibilities of school principals continue to evolve. The development of standards must not be a singular event, but a continuous process for school districts as they align their actions to evolving priorities (Turnbull et al., 2016).

A continuous review of principal standards allows for coherence and alignment to district practices. Because clear performance-based standards bring focus, the standards must be evident in district practices and initiatives, including succession planning, principal preparation, hiring, induction, support, and evaluation. In The Wallace Foundation's work with the Principal Pipeline, Turnbull et al. (2015) found districts in the pipeline actively used standards in structuring principal preparation, hiring,



evaluation, and development and expected continuous review and revisions to the standards. School districts in the pipeline considered standards to be living, breathing documents. According to Mendels & Mitgang (2013), “The point is that leadership standards only come to life when districts actually use them to shape how they select, hire, train, and evaluate school leaders” (p. 23).

While standards focus on the variety of skills necessary for the role, principal standards must emphasize the leader’s role in the improvement of teaching and learning. Such opportunities should go beyond a solid understanding of classroom instruction; the measures must further a principal’s ability to coach teachers, plan professional development, and use data to meet the needs of students (Mitgang, 2012).

#### **Use of a cohort model.**

Networking, relationships, and professional development are key aspects of any induction program and can be addressed through the use of a cohort model. According to Lauder (2000), a cohort is a group learning together, from and with each other, through regularly scheduled opportunities. Cohort groups are increasingly popular and create common sets of experiences for its members. Supporters believe adult learning is best realized when participants work collaboratively through teamwork and shared authority to solve relevant problems (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). Successful leadership development programs embed cohort structures in their programming (Orr et al., 2010).

When leaders share beliefs, create common goals, and join their efforts, they can overcome challenges, produce positive results, and become more effective (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018). In a continuation of his work with efficacy, Albert Bandura

(1997) identified a phenomenon he named collective efficacy, which he defined as “a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment” (p. 477). Collective efficacy influences culture and how individuals within a group think, feel, and behave (Bandura, 1993).

Collective efficacy is the greatest factor that influences student achievement (Hattie, 2016). Principals with skills that foster collective efficacy in their schools celebrate its impact in both achievement and school culture. Consequently, leaders in cohort groups achieve optimal success through collective efficacy. When leaders believe they can effectively face difficult challenges, they persist by maintaining high expectations for their work and maximizing their efforts to reach their goals (Donohoo et al., 2018).

A variety of cohort structures are utilized in school districts across the United States. For example, school districts can assign novice principals to participate in a cohort structure. Alternatively, school districts can also develop cohorts based on other characteristics, such as school demographics or professional learning needs, to maximize the knowledge, experiences, and strengths of diverse school leaders. Use of a cohort model can increase communication and collaboration between and among its members through sharing of ideas and team learning. These relationships lead to both individualized professional development and organizational learning (Umekubo, Chrispeels, & Daly, 2015).

Despite the design of the cohort structure, a key factor in the development of a successful cohort is the creation, development, and sustainability of a shared vision with

teaching and learning at its core. When successfully embedded in the practices of a school district, a cohort group provides both autonomy to its leaders and a coherent structure of system-wide professional development (Umekubo et al., 2015). Cohort members benefit from problem-solving through multiple perspectives, increasing creativity, and reflective practices.

In their review of research, Davis et al. (2005) stated, “The positive effects of cohort structured learning experiences include enhanced feelings of group affiliation and acceptance, social and emotional support, motivation, persistence, group learning, and mutual assistance” (p.10). When trusting relationships are established, leaders can allow themselves to be vulnerable and open to new ideas and new learning. A cohort model supports formal and informal relationships within the cohort and across the school district. Furthermore, Barnett et al. (2015) found cohort users benefited from increase collegiality, bonding, community, reciprocal support, cooperation, sense of belonging, camaraderie, networking, trust, and solidarity.

Through these collaborative networking opportunities, cohort groupings become a support group for principals. The Wallace Foundation required all participating districts in their Principal Pipeline Initiative to employ the use of cohort models. District leaders in Pipeline districts considered the cohort groupings to be critical in the experiences of its members. Pipeline districts reported cohorts serving as professional learning communities that provided members with opportunities to discuss problems of practice, to receive support from district leaders and other experts, and to develop skills and competencies (Turnbull et al., 2016).

Finally, in a study from Umekubo et al. (2015), school districts identified improvements in student achievement through the use of cohort models.

Trusting relationships fostered strong collaboration amongst principals and led to higher levels of social capital and intellectual capital, which in turn enabled the schools and cohorts to practice the components of organizational learning. These schools and the district achieved sustained increases in student achievement (p. 451).

With evidence of increased learning, the cohort model is a powerful tool for principals and school districts.

### **High-quality mentoring.**

Another design feature critical to the effectiveness of a principal induction program is the use of high-quality mentoring. According to Lamar (2018), mentoring is simply an intentional relationship created to help and develop novice leaders. Further, Wong (2004) describes a mentoring program as an isolated phase of intentional support that involves single or group mentoring, requires minimal resources, and provides novice professionals with assistance as needs arise. While commonly used, the implementation of principal mentoring programs has not traditionally been a priority of school districts. However, new and aspiring leaders greatly benefit from meaningful, ongoing networks of support.

Mentor-mentee relationships are important to principal induction programming, as meaningful mentorships are designed to improve school performance and student achievement (Shelton, 2011). These relationships are formed to provide high-quality, differentiated training while providing support through real-life problem-solving

situations. In many cases, traditional mentoring programs have not met the needs of novice principals due the lack of focus on instructional leadership, sufficient training for mentors and mentoring time, and funding. Further, unclear goals and over-attention to managerial duties also damage the success of principal mentoring programs (Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007).

Too often, in school districts across the United States, mentoring programs are synonymous with induction programs. However, mentoring is just one of the key design features of an effective principal induction program (Frels, Zientek, & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Quality mentoring as a critical component of a principal induction program is one of the most promising methods of providing differentiated instructional, emotional, and managerial support to new principals. Beyond that quality mentors can assist new principals by facilitating a sense of belonging, a decrease in feelings of isolation, and provide supports, which allow a novice principal to focus on instructional leadership (Dukess, 2001).

Interestingly, quality components of effective principal mentoring programs vary across literature. For example, in 2007, The Wallace Foundation identified quality guidelines for new principal mentoring programs, including clear goals focused on the knowledge and skills to facilitate change in teaching and learning, high quality training for mentors, program efficacy to ensure development of leadership behaviors and dispositions, year-long mentorships, and support through state and local funding. Furthermore, the six districts who participated in The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative had at least one mentoring program in place for new principals, and

mentors were regarded by new principals as the most highly valued source of support (Turnbull et al., 2016).

On top of that, purposeful, careful consideration should be placed in matching principals and mentors. Mentors must have the capacity to have continued success in their own leadership positions while lending their expertise as instructional leaders and serving the mentees' needs. Quality mentoring becomes a type of coaching where questioning strategies, experiential learning, and reflective practices are used to guide the novice principal toward confidence, refined skills, and an increased understanding of the impact of his/her decisions. In the end, emphasis must be placed on the role of the mentor to promote a relationship that produces quality results (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016).

The development of honest, trusting relationships is paramount in a mentor-mentee relationship. These relationships must be welcomed by both the mentor and the mentee, confidential, and non-supervisory. Mentors with the following characteristics show the greatest success in role of the principal mentor: a history of success as a principal, an expert instructional leader, extensive knowledge in curriculum, instruction and assessment, strong interpersonal skills, a reflective thinker, and someone compassionate and truthful with feedback, along with being carefully matched to serve the needs of the new principal (Dukess, 2001).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) developed standards for principal mentors, which include high quality training for aspiring mentors. Program goals encompass creating a group of experienced principals with the skills and tools to promote leadership aligned to principal standards and creating a model for instructional leadership mentor training consistent with professional standards and which

addresses the specific needs of novice school principals. The program places value on mentors who have strong integrity and ethics, communication and listening skills, the ability to provide a clear vision, respect confidentiality, value multiple solutions in the problem-solving process, recognize strengths, and fosters effective formal and informal mentoring relationships (2020).

With that said, a variety of challenges can prove to be barriers to successful mentoring programs. Problems include the lack of sufficient mentoring time or program duration, logistical barriers, variance in school characteristics, multiple mentees, poor matching, ineffective communication, lack of emotional support, and personality conflicts. According to Frels et al. (2013) the greatest and most important barriers concern the confidentiality of the relationship, the selection of the mentors, the selection of discussion topics, and support and preparation for the mentors. And, The Wallace Foundation (2007) identified additional common barriers to effective principal mentoring programs, which include: vague or unclear goals, lack of focus on instructional leadership, overemphasis on the managerial role, minimal training for mentors, and underfunding of programs.

### **Reflective practices.**

Just as mastery experiences are critical to feelings of self-efficacy, reflecting on one's experiences is key to adult learning. Through his classic experiential learning theory, John Dewey (1933) acknowledged reflection as a critical means to understanding the significance in one's own experiences. Reflection can be defined as the thoughtful consideration of an experience to make meaning and provide deeper understanding of learning through relationships and connections to other experiences and ideas

(Rodgers, 2002). According to Kuk & Holst (2018), “reflection plays a mediating role between experience and learning” (p. 151). Thereafter, serving as the bridge from experiences to learning, when reflective practices are employed, connections from theory to practice are made as meaning is found, which results in learning (Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Kuk & Holst, 2018; Mitgang, 2008).

As a disciplined way of thinking, reflective strategies are rigorous, require time and commitment, and place value on the personal growth of self and others (Lauder, 2000; Rodgers, 2002). Based on Dewey’s (1933) work with experiential learning theory and through their work with the Principal Leadership Development Framework lens, Hall et al. (2016) noted, “Effective leaders must be aware of their contextual reality, act with intentionality, assess the effect of their actions, and adjust course as necessary” (p. 4). These actions can be honed through reflective practices, which connect beliefs to actions and guide leadership success.

The act of self-reflection occurs through understanding oneself as a leader and focusing personal development through intentional practices (Hall et al., 2016). To aid in this development, Hall et al. created the Principal’s Continuum of Self-Reflection for the purpose of “helping school leaders – all school leaders – understand their current state of mind and assist in identifying specific behaviors that will foster more meaningful reflective habits” (p. 14). A further exploration of this model assists in the understanding of reflective practices as a critical means toward creating principal efficacy and the use of reflective practices in principal induction programming.



Based on the Principal Leadership Development Framework, the Principal's Continuum of Self-Reflection identifies four progressive stages of development which include the unaware stage, the conscious stage, the action stage, and the refinement stage.

	UNAWARE STAGE	CONSCIOUS STAGE	ACTION STAGE	REFINEMENT STAGE
Reflective Tendencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Demonstrates little or no awareness of current reality in the school building and nuanced cultural context.</li> <li>•Oriented to routine.</li> <li>•Reacts emotionally or impulsively to the immediate needs of the school.</li> <li>•Focuses on the job itself--the tasks of the principalship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Demonstrates a consistent "knowing-doing" gap.</li> <li>•Offers explanations for problems and circumstances.</li> <li>•Misconstrues the factors requiring action.</li> <li>•Focuses first on self and one's own role in the principalship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Accepts responsibility for the success of the students, staff, and self.</li> <li>•Evaluates situations objectively.</li> <li>•Seeks solutions to problems.</li> <li>•Focuses on the science of leadership, managing resources and implementing research-based practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Recognizes there are multiple options to address every problem.</li> <li>•Maintains and seeks out a vast repertoire of leadership strategies.</li> <li>•Adjusts course when necessary to maintain heading toward common goal.</li> <li>•Focuses on the fluid art of leadership, seeking ongoing feedback and maintaining a relentless focus on continuous improvement.</li> </ul>

*Figure 1.* The Principal's Continuum of Self-Reflection (Hall et al., 2016, p. 14).

With the Principal's Continuum of Self-Reflection, a new leader can identify specific areas of focus in the development of the four key roles identified on ASCD's Principal Leadership Development Framework. These areas include Principal as Visionary, Principal as Instructional Leader, Principal as Engager; and Principal as Learner and Collaborator. As a result, a new principal can seek professional growth opportunities that target his/her specific areas for continued development.

The key design features highlighted above are to be used collectively and not in isolation. Principal induction programs must use a combination of formal and informal practices to achieve desired outcomes. However, school districts must begin to prioritize induction programming for novice principals and include these features as formal components of their organization's continuous improvement process to support the self-efficacy of school leaders.

## **Principal Preparation and Induction Offerings Across the United States**

Induction programs for principals are not as prevalent as programs for new teachers. Very few states require induction programs for new leaders. Undeniably, states and school districts cannot solely depend on university programs to prepare future building leaders. Based on the unique needs of any leadership position, higher education programs cannot be expected to comprehensively prepare new leaders to begin the principalship. Without the proper means of support, novice principals may experience feelings of being inefficient, overwhelmed, and defeated.

In addition, principal induction programs vary from state to state. For instance, in an examination of principal development and induction programs across the United States, the key design feature most commonly utilized is mentoring; however, specific program requirements lead to different outcomes across states. For the purpose of this review, New Jersey, Ohio, Illinois, Kansas, and Nebraska are highlighted to show examples of principal induction programming across the United States.

### **New Jersey.**

The State of New Jersey provides an example of induction practices commonly used across the United States. New Jersey's Standards for School Leaders have provided guidance to leaders since 2015. The state's principal induction program, Leaders to Leaders, is a 2-year, statewide program required for all new principals and school leaders. The program, facilitated in partnership with the local professional organizations, provides mentoring, professional learning, training, and other professional experiences in efforts to support new principals (California County Superintendents Educational Services

Association, 2016; New Jersey Department of Education, 2020; Newman, Prociw, Hull, Collins, & Supovitz, 2017).

Mentors participating in New Jersey's program consist of current and retired school administrators with a minimum of 5 years of experience in school administration. Mentors evaluate mentees to certify novice principals fulfill the program requirements (California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, 2016; New Jersey Department of Education, 2020).

### **Ohio.**

As with nearly all states, principal induction programming in Ohio is not a state requirement. With leadership development as the focus, Ohio facilitates a 3-year leadership development program as a requirement for those seeking alternative pathways to the principalship. The program components include mentoring and professional development opportunities led by individual school districts with support provided by the local principal and superintendent associations. The Ohio Department of Education provides oversight to these state programs (California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, 2016).

In 2017, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) published a report emphasizing the importance of their partnership with universities/colleges and school districts in supporting today's school principals. The ODE facilitated a workgroup who sought to identify principals' needs at various career stages and provided recommendations for professional learning to address identified needs. Among their findings, the ODE's workgroup found beginning principals struggled with the lack of support, the lack of experience and knowledge, the lack of addressing diverse student

needs, the lack of quality mentoring, and the lack of managing the additional duties as assigned they faced.

Upon these findings, the ODE workgroup recommended the creation of an induction program for beginning principals. Although presenting a variety of recommendations, few details can be gleaned as specific actions school districts could use to establish quality principal induction programming. However, the workgroup did suggest placing a focus on the creation of standards and the identification of gaps and needs to provide supportive experiences for novice principals.

While standards and needs were emphasized, the Ohio Department of Education's (2017) workgroup placed the greatest emphasis on providing principal mentoring. The workgroup also emphasized that an experienced and successful principal does not necessarily make a good mentor. The report further acknowledged that the state's previous attempts in executing a new principal mentoring program were not successful partially due to utilizing mentors who did not consistently follow through on responsibilities and expectations.

### **Illinois.**

A Blueprint for Change was released by the Commission on School Leader Preparation in Illinois Colleges and Universities (2006) in efforts to increase the focus on student achievement through restructuring principal preparation programming. A task force was commissioned to develop rules for principal programming by creating a more rigorous approach, requiring partnerships between school districts, and improving leadership preparation programming. Additional rules that came out of this work created implications for school districts as they developed principal induction programs,

including aligning the program to leadership standards with trained mentors providing supervision best practices for adults learning.

Subsequently, the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders were developed in 2015. With these standards as the foundation, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) created programming called the Administrators' Academy to promote statewide professional learning opportunities for school administrators. Program requirements include the completion of one academy program per year during the first 5 years of the novice principalship (Commission on School Leader Preparation in Illinois Colleges and Universities, 2006; Newman et al., 2017).

Contingent on the state's budget a 1-year principal mentoring program is also a component of Illinois' induction programming. Selected mentors must have over 3 years of successful experience in the principalship, specifically as instructional leaders. Other requirements of mentors include similar grade spans and proximity to the mentees. Mentors are expected to supervise progress of the mentees to ensure the completion of program requirements (California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, 2016).

### **Kansas.**

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute (KELI) focuses on mentoring and induction programming for new principals. The institute provides ongoing professional development opportunities through a collaborative effort with the Kansas State Department of Education, Kansas State University, Kansas School Superintendents Association, United School Administrators of Kansas, and Kansas Association of School Boards (Newman et al., 2017).

Beginning in 2012, Kansas's Building Leader Mentoring and Induction Task Force led a state-wide effort to continue leadership development through the creation of principal induction practices. While the focus of the program is mentoring, KELI strives to provide additional collaborative professional development opportunities, such as seminars, which are designed to focus on needs of new principals in addressing state and federal initiatives (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016).

Since its induction, during the 2013-14 school year, the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute has undergone an annual program review with participants, leadership, and program mentors. The KELI has since evolved toward becoming a solution-based program that supports the needs of the novice principal. Through the employment of trained mentors, experiential learning and reflective practices, the program has created opportunities, which lead novice principals to learn strategies that create relationships with all stakeholder groups, align state, district, and school goals, and build confidence and efficacy (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016).

### **Nebraska.**

The Nebraska Teacher and Principal Performance Framework was developed in 2011 with updates in 2017. The state of Nebraska does not provide statewide programming for principal induction. However, through partnerships with Educational Service Units (ESUs) across the state, public school districts in Nebraska have opportunities to design professional learning for their school leaders, which meets their local needs (Newman et al., 2017).

The Nebraska Leadership and Learning Network (NLLN, 1999) was developed by NDE, ESUs, community partners, local universities, and the Nebraska Council of

School Administrators to address Nebraska's response to Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. The NLLN provides supportive opportunities to principals of schools NDE determined as having the highest needs for leadership development. While not designed specifically for novice principals, new leaders can benefit from the ongoing networking opportunities the NLLN provides (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017).

Goals of the NLLN program are to increase equity across Nebraska's schools by providing research-based leadership development, facilitating collaboration with other principals in the state, and promoting collaboration using problem-solving methods and support from state consultants. Currently, the program currently serves just five schools across the state. By committing to the program, participants also agree to join the efforts of a design team with the goal of further developing the program as a statewide resource for the future (Nebraska Department of Education, 2019).

#### **One Midwestern, Suburban Public School District.**

In 2019-2020, 15 elementary schools provide education for kindergarten through sixth grade learners. Years of service of elementary principals in this school district ranged from one first year principal to a principal with 21 years of experience. The average number of years of service as an elementary principal is 7.26.

The aforementioned school district has employed a multi-faced approach to principal induction programming similar to programs facilitated across the United States. New principal mentoring, cohort groupings, and ongoing new principal professional development opportunities encompass the program's components. Prior to beginning the leadership role, each incoming elementary principal is assigned a year-long mentor. The role of the mentor is determined by the district-level administration with specific efforts

to match the strengths and needs of the mentee with the strengths and skills of the mentor. A large emphasis is placed on relationships and prior relationships between the mentor and mentee, which are factors in the placement process. In addition, personality characteristics, the new principal's prior knowledge of school district practices assist in determining a well-suited principal mentee. Principal cohorts can also be a factor in the placement of principal mentors (K.A. Settles, personal communication, April 23, 2020).

Principal cohorts have been in place for elementary principals for approximately 10 years. Elementary schools in the district are divided into three separate cohort groups, which are determined by grouping schools with similar student demographics. All elementary principals in the district participate in cohort groupings; however, content and frequency of meetings and professional development opportunities can vary from cohort to cohort. Collaborative activities are generally determined by the cohort members, where specific content is occasionally directed by district leadership. District leadership staff commonly participate in cohort meetings and additional professionals are invited based on their expertise of the subject matter and the principal cohort's needs, such as curriculum, student services, and special education representatives.

Furthermore, new principals participate in multiple, ongoing professional development opportunities. Opportunities presented to new principals change from year-to-year based on a variety of factors, including state and local policies, district-led practices and initiatives, and needs of the cohort members. Topics such as teacher evaluation and supervision, special education practices, continuous improvement processes, and the Marzano Instructional Model have been areas of past learning (Marzano, 2007; Marzano, 2017). New principals can also identify topics of need to be



addressed and have ongoing opportunities to ask questions regarding problems of practice.

In summary, school leaders must possess a broad range of knowledge and skills to be effective in today's increasingly complex school environment (Shelton, 2011). To assist novice principals toward successfully meeting the demands of the principalship, states and school districts can work together to create meaningful induction practices, which may lead to efficacious principals. By creating programs with key design features and including state support, novice principals can move from feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty toward understanding skills and practices necessary for job success and thus increased student achievement. All in all, when states, school districts, and new principals work together to develop principal efficacy, all members of the organization benefit.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

School districts must take an active role in the development of their newest leaders to ensure they are prepared for the complex role of the principalship. With expansive duties and time constraints, new principals must have methods to guide their own professional learning for maximum benefit. More importantly, the influences and experiences necessary to lead today's schools can vary from one principal to the next. Therefore, the focus of this phenomenological study is to identify pivotal experiences that support new principals and school districts in efforts which may develop principal self-efficacy.

#### **Research Question**

The research question for this study is: What are the experiences that help novice elementary principals improve self-efficacy?

#### **Research Design**

Qualitative research attempts to address the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a human or social problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With the use of qualitative research methods, a researcher can consider multiple perspectives to gather knowledge and make interpretations through social inquiry. Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) define qualitative research as, "social research that is aimed at investigating the way in which people make sense of their ideas and experiences" (p.11). Qualitative methods were appropriate for this study as the research sought to explore the experiences of novice principals that lead to self-efficacy.

A phenomenological approach attempts to discover experiences that participants of a phenomenon have in common (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More specifically, a descriptive phenomenological approach was used in this study to communicate the experiences of study participants (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Through the investigation of the common experiences of principals, the aim was to determine key experiences that lead to feelings of principal self-efficacy. These experiences could then be replicated to determine individualized professional development opportunities and to support school districts with principal induction programming.

According to Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2004), “information about the factors that contribute to principals’ sense of efficacy can assist in improving principal preparation programs and in developing and refining effective induction and mentoring programs for school principals” (p. 24). Thus, the central phenomenon of this study is to explore mastery experiences that lead to efficacious principals.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher in this study, I have had continued interest in principal self-efficacy and principal induction programming. My role as a researcher comes with over 20 years of experience in the field of education. My undergraduate studies included endorsements in K-8 elementary education and K-9 special education. I served as a special education teacher in a suburban school district for 8 years while I completed a master’s degree in educational administration and supervision. Next, I entered my administrative career in the pseudo-administrative role of teacher leader, most universally described as an assistant principal. After 2 years in this role, I was named principal of an elementary school and had the opportunity to serve as a building principal in three

additional buildings and two suburban school districts over the course of 12 years. Currently, I serve as a director of human resources in a relatively large midwestern, suburban school district.

Refining the school district's principal induction program and mentoring elementary principals are included in my job responsibilities. Therefore, a limitation of the study is researcher bias. I have had personal experiences with the principal induction program and mentoring program, including my own participation in the program, my work as an elementary principal and principal mentor, and in my current position in human resources.

### **Delimitation**

The focus on experiences of elementary principals in one school district is a delimitation of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This will limit the generalizability of this study.

### **Participants**

Elementary principals in a midwestern, suburban, public school district were the participants of this study. In a phenomenological study, Creswell & Poth (2018) recommend five to 25 in-depth interviews. A total of seven elementary principals participated in the study, the time at which saturation occurred and no new themes were presented (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using maximum variation sampling, a common approach in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). With maximum variation sampling, participants were determined in advance based on differentiating criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This strategy increases the potential for the researcher to gather varying perspectives to reflect differences (Creswell, 2013).

For the purpose of this study, the differentiated criteria included individualized experiences as principals and years in the principalship. Principals in their first 3 years of the principalship were categorized as novice principals. While these professionals may have had experiences as teachers and assistant principals in other school districts, they began their careers as elementary principals at the midwestern, suburban public school district. Principals in years 4 through 6 of the principalship were grouped as experienced principals. The principals selected for interviews from this group were previously employed at the midwestern, suburban public school district as assistant principals and were promoted to elementary principals, thus giving specific insight to the induction experiences throughout the transition to the principal role. Interviewees with 7 or more years of service were categorized as veteran principals. Experiences of these principals varied and included principals whose careers were only at the research site school district and principals with experiences in multiple school districts. Perspectives of induction experiences from multiple school districts were sought to provide valuable insight for future induction practices in this midwestern, suburban public school district.

### **Data Collection**

Seven interviews ranged in length from 58 minutes to 1 hour, 17 minutes. Interviews took place in May and June of 2020 and were conducted electronically via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. The interview protocol consisted of 23 semi-structured questions and were developed by this researcher as a result of investigating the sources referenced throughout the study (see Appendix A). More specifically, the

conceptual framework ASCD's Principal Leadership Development Framework (PDLF) was used extensively to create questions to probe each of the PDLF's four key roles of a principal: Principal as Visionary, Principal as Instructional Leader, Principal as Engager, and Principal as Learner and Collaborator (Hall et al., 2016).

In addition to interview transcripts, field notes were taken both throughout and after each interview to capture thoughts, ideas, and reflections. This study is bounded by the experiences of elementary principals in one midwestern, suburban, public school district.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this phenomenological study involved a comprehensive review of all data collected from interview transcripts and field notes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and examined for meanings, patterns, relationships, events, and state of mind in a process called coding (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Specific notations were made for statements of significance, which provided insight to study participants' experiences with the phenomenon. Participant responses were coded using 'in vivo' coding, a process that utilized the exact words of participants, to form categories, or codes, prior to the development of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of 39 codes emerged from the analysis of the data.

The researcher then collected similar codes to form categories described as meaning units or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A theme in a qualitative study provides evidence and explanation for the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). Codes from personal reflection notes were also included in the development of themes to gain further understanding of the interviewer's perceptions of experiences shared by

participants. Textural descriptions were written and included verbatim examples of the experiences of interview participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Validation Strategies**

Validation strategies in qualitative research are used to check for accuracy by the researcher, participants, and reviewers (Creswell, 2016). The validation strategies used in this study to increase the credibility of the data included triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity.

1. Triangulation: Triangulation refers to using evidence from various sources to establish themes in a study (Creswell, 2016). In this study, triangulation of data was achieved by categorizing interviewees into three groups based on years of experience as a principal. In addition, field notes and artifacts were reviewed and coded to validate themes that emerged from interviews with participants.
2. Member checking: According to Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013), member checking increases credibility by checking with participants for feedback or verification of interpretation. Following each interview, the interview transcript was sent to the study participant to provide opportunity to omit, clarify, or rephrase any comments made during the interview. Participants were asked to approve completion of this process for documentation purposes.
3. Researcher reflexivity: According to Creswell (2016), researcher reflexivity occurs when researchers examine their own experiences with the phenomenon and how these experiences shape the interpretation of the phenomenon. The researcher's experiences and biases regarding the research topic are explained in the Role of the Researcher section of this chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This purpose of this study was to explore the leadership experiences critical to developing self-efficacy in elementary principals within a midwestern, suburban, public school district. During in-depth, semi-structured interviews, participants described experiences related to ASCD's Principal Leadership Development Framework. The four principal roles emphasized in the Principal Leadership Development Framework (PDLF) include: (1) Principal as Visionary; (2) Principal as Instructional Leader; (3) Principal as Engager; and (4) Principal as Learner and Collaborator (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2016).

Maximum variation sampling was utilized, and seven elementary principals were interviewed. Participants' experiences ranged from 2 to 14 years of service in the principalship. For the purpose of this study, principals in their first 3 years in the principal role were categorized as novice principals, and three novice principals were interviewed. Two principals in years 4 through 6 of the principalship, referred to as experienced principals, participated in the study; and two veteran principals, principals with 7 or more years of service, were also interviewed. For the purposes of data presentation and confidentiality, principals were also identified as Principal A-Principal G, labels, which have no relation to years of service.

While it was often challenging for participants to pinpoint specific experiences related feelings of self-efficacy, themes surfaced and provided insight toward answering the research question: What are the experiences that help novice elementary principals



improve self-efficacy? The four overarching themes that impacted participants' feelings of self-efficacy include:

- 1) Collective Teacher Efficacy,
- 2) Positive School Culture,
- 3) Supportive Relationships, and
- 4) Emotional Self-Awareness.

Multiple connections among the four themes were observed. Further, the themes tied closely to the Roles of the Principal emphasized in ASCD's Principal Leadership Development Framework (Hall et al., 2015). Examples of the relationships between themes and the four key roles of principal leadership were also examined.

### **Theme 1: Collective Teacher Efficacy**

As self-efficacy refers to the beliefs of one's own ability to perform a task or achieve a goal, collective efficacy signifies beliefs in the ability of one's colleagues as a group (Leithwood & Janzi, 2008). Donohoo (2017) posits that "Collective teacher efficacy refers to teachers in a school characterized by an attitude that together they can make a difference for students" (p. 3). Moreover, collective efficacy is formed through cognitive processing, interpretation of events, the team's assessment of the task, and its competency as a team.

According to Hattie (2016), collective efficacy is the number one factor influencing student achievement. Efficacious teams exhibit behaviors that motivate, promote learning, address challenges, and provide a productive environment where both staff and students thrive. Donohoo (2017) furthered this work and emphasized these behaviors, which are positively associated with efficacy, that impact student

achievement: effort and persistence, willingness to try new approaches, ability to communicate high expectations, cultivate learner autonomy, decrease disruptive behavior, increase commitment, and boost parental involvement.

Data analyzed in this study showed multiple examples of principals working toward the goal of achieving collective teacher efficacy in their schools. Levels of success, with achieving collective teacher efficacy, appeared to greatly impact the participants' own feelings of self-efficacy. All seven study participants described examples of collective teacher efficacy within school teams and alluded to the several behaviors noted in Donohoo's (2017) work with collective efficacy. Principal D summarized examples of greater effort and persistence from staff:

I would say building self-efficacy in my staff members, so them wanting to have instructional rounds and have people come to observe them, that ensures we're meeting the goals that we have set forth... That's ensuring growth because we're not okay with complacency that we're always looking to build and grow.

Principal B offered this insight regarding effort and persistence:

That gives me a lot of hope that we have changed it (instruction). And I say 'we' because it's not just me. It's a team of us. We have successfully changed instruction at some grade levels in our building, and that's because it's ongoing feedback, but it's also the support of an instructional coach, of our teams, of district-wide trainings. And I think it's making those things priority, making PLC a priority, making district training a priority...

Principal F provided an example, which showed the willingness to try new approaches:

We have teachers leading them (instructional rounds), and, to me, that is authentic learning. We have a goal. We have a purpose. I set that with whoever's running the rounds and then, 'What was our learning from that? And what are our takeaways, and who's following up on that? So, ensuring that the processes are in place and then it's moving teachers along. This has been something that I've, I've really enjoyed watching.

Principal C reflected on this experience working toward increased commitment from staff:

(This) is a partnership; we do it together. We're in it together. I know this is cliché, but it's 'we' versus 'I' and this is not an 'I' building, it's a 'we' building. How do 'we' get to where 'we' need to be?

Principal G also reference increased commitment:

To me, it's more about those specific actions. Now, yes, the outcomes matter, I'm not saying the outcomes don't matter, but it really gets down to, it's a shift, because it used to just always be about, 'What are the kids doing and what's the outcome of the kid?' Well, we really need to change the mindset to what the adults are doing to improve those outcomes.

Principal E shared these thoughts related to parental involvement:

No one works in isolation, so everyone is working collaboratively toward the goal of improving instructional outcomes for kids, and improving academic achievement for kids, and improving behavioral outcomes. And I think that's one big piece, that we're all, like, that whole cliché, 'We're all

in this together.' But we truly are, you know, depending on what a kid needs. We need to work together to meet that need.

Analysis of the data showed none of the principals described feeling they achieved collective efficacy with all staff in their schools. Instead, all participants provided at least one example of continuing to work toward collective teacher efficacy. Principal E provided these thoughts when describing experiences when collective efficacy was not yet evident:

What I see is, like, I'll see amazing outcomes and growth for some grade levels and not in others. And so, what that tells me is that we don't have a systematic building approach. We have powerful teachers doing amazing things for kids in individual classrooms and individual grade levels, but we haven't made that switch to being where the whole building is doing it...I don't think I'm where I need to be as an instructional leader...My job is to get everybody at that level.

Principal E further noted:

I know that I am an important part of this, but I'm not the only leader in this building...I'm not the only person and I need them to start seeing that this is a team effort and we're all in this together.

A novice principal noted the following experience, when moving to make change without having achieved collective efficacy:

I needed support with how fast I (should) move as a new administrator. That blindsided me...It blindsided me. I didn't know when I got in there, and I just started moving. When you're a new principal you think like,

‘Oh, well, everyone will just follow you.’ No, no, that's actually not the case.

Additional experiences with school leadership teams, including school improvement teams and professional learning communities, were noted as providing significant learning experiences for all principals in this study. Principal F described:

I think about formalized systems, and one of the ones that helped me grow the most was actually the leadership team within the building. I'd reach out to them and build trust, just so we can get to a point where we can have an honest conversation.

Principal A noted:

When I had the right people around me, as I started to restructure teams, like, here's a person that's very structured that could help me with that. And here's the person that might have some of the skills that I don't have that can help build continuous improvement. I think that was when I started to have the aha moment. That was probably year 3, when I started getting into the groove of understanding my qualities and the qualities of the people that I built around me blended really nicely. I'd say year 3 if you want to put an exact date on it was when I had my aha moment.

### **The principal roles and collective teacher efficacy.**

The data showed direct alignment of collective teacher efficacy to the role of Principal as Engager. As noted in ASCD's Principal Leadership Development Framework (PDLF), the Engager facilitates, develops, models, and participates in a variety of collaborative practices that directly align to efforts that lead to collective

teacher efficacy. Examples from the PDLF include developing internal leaders, nurturing an environment of distributed leadership, collective responsibility, and collaborative decision-making (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2016).

Collective teacher efficacy also aligns with the role of Principal as Instructional Leader through building capacity of staff and its impact on student achievement. According to the PDLF, a leadership component of Principal as Instructional Leader is to build the collective capacity of staff. The importance of building staff capacity was noted by all interview participants to some extent. Further, Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk (2000) found collective teacher efficacy in elementary schools was more of a significant predictor of student achievement than socioeconomic status. The data showed when principals described experiences with effective school teams, such as PLC teams, leadership teams, or school improvement teams, their feelings of self-efficacy regarding student achievement increased.

## **Theme 2: Positive School Culture**

A second significant theme from the analysis of this study is Positive School Culture. The term culture has been historically defined with a variety of broad meanings to encompass the daily functioning of a school, the school's reality, and its mutually understood standards (Fink, 2005). For the purposes of this study, culture is defined as the deeper basic assumptions and beliefs shared unconsciously by members of an organization and includes an organization's view of itself and its environment (Evans, 2001). Simply put, culture is the way things are done at the school (Fink, 2005).

Culture can positively or negatively impact a school's effectiveness. An effective leader can positively impact staff, students, and the school community by establishing

and communicating the priorities of the school giving the collective school community a sense of purpose (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).

When leaders create a vibrant and joyful culture, teachers are *more* willing to be held accountable and *more* willing to do the hard work that makes a school work because there is a level of respect, trust, and appreciation for the work that they do (Bambrick-Santoyo & Peiser, 2012, p. 190).

In addition, concrete actions are necessary to improve school culture and can greatly impact student achievement and overall school effectiveness (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). The establishment of cultural norms are necessary to guide change and improve schools. For instance, norms to navigate change in schools include shared goals, responsibility for success, collegiality, continuous improvement, lifelong learning, risk taking, support, mutual respect, openness, celebration and humor (Fink, 2005). More specifically, Bambrick-Santoyo & Peiser (2012) identified five key areas of focus for principals to improve school culture:

- (1) Set a clear vision for the school environment;
- (2) Get the right people as the vision should drive hiring;
- (3) Share your commitment to developing a strong staff culture and prioritize from the beginning of the year;
- (4) Beware of negative culture warning signs; and
- (5) Identify intentional actions to build, maintain, and communicate your staff culture.

All seven interview participants shared experiences, insight, and examples of school culture impacting their own feelings of self-efficacy. The data showed feelings of

self-efficacy grew significantly when principals considered the school culture as positive. Responses were analyzed and organized using Bambrick-Santoyo & Peiser's (2012) five focus areas to improve school culture.

Establishing a clear vision for the school was discussed at length by all study participants. The data showed participants described varying degrees of success with the establishment and communication of the school's vision. Of note, experienced and veteran principals did not communicate greater feelings of success than novice principals.

When considering setting a clear vision for the school environment, Principal A stated:

When I look at my vision as a principal, the first and foremost thing that I always go to, hands down, is the environment that you create. I think the buildings that I've been in and the successes that I've seen with people in school buildings, it really always comes down to the culture that you build. If you build a place that people feel comfortable coming to, that people enjoy coming to, that people believe in the philosophy that you're telling people, then they're more willing to go that extra mile for kids. I really believe that, so for me, my vision always starts with that, climate and culture. I feel like that's something that is going to be on my gravestone. That'd be the one thing that I'd say it's an absolute must.

Principal B stressed the importance of a shared vision:

"My vision for my school going forward is that we keep moving towards a common goal, and that comes with looking at culture as well as looking at instruction."

Principal D voiced the importance of creating a positive school community:



Culture is really important to me. Having a strong community, having faith in us that we're doing a good job, that we have academic rigor, that we provide enrichment opportunities for kids, all kids, that we are inclusive... I want teachers to feel valued. I want them to feel competent.

An experienced principal reflected on sharing the vision after multiple years as a member of the school community:

I feel a lot more confident because I'm more embedded in the culture. I'm more embedded in the community. I have a better understanding of the kids, and so would I be able to clearly articulate that to every stakeholder? Yeah, I would. And it might sound a little different to each group, but I think the end result is the same. We're here for kids. Here's my part in it. Here's your part in it. And here's where we're going.

Commonly, study participants described ways they worked toward focusing on the getting the right people in the right roles to carry out the shared vision. Principal F noted:

My job is to prepare and to equip teachers with a healthy environment to work in, with the tools and resources they need to feel supported so that they can be at their best for kids. My piece really focuses on preparing teachers and being a bridge with our community.

Principal C reflected on hiring quality staff with a consistent focus on including all students:

You are a teacher for your classroom, but you're also a teacher for every student inside the building. It's everybody taking ownership of every

student rather than just taking ownership of the students that you currently have.

Principal G reflected on the importance of trusting relationships in a school culture:

I have teachers reaching out because of their relationships and the trust that we've worked to develop as a building, as a community, and I think that ...those are the pieces that aren't always, you know, analytically measured in a quantitative study, but those are the qualitative stories that we have to listen for and those are the conversations and the relationships that we have to recognize.

Participants also reflected on developing and prioritizing a strong staff culture from the beginning of the year. An experienced principal reflected:

The strengths that I had was I walked in and just made it clear to the staff that I was here to learn, too, and it worked out to my benefit. I was patient that first year so reliability, patience, and I had an open-door policy that I felt people appreciated.

When considering developing a strong, collaborative staff culture, Principal B noted the importance of establishing an environment of accepting vulnerability:

It's about supporting you and making you better and us getting better together. And being vulnerable. Yeah, that's huge. Like being able to say, which I said a lot my first 2 years as a principal, being able to stand up and say, 'Guys, I'm sorry, that one's on me.' You know? And being vulnerable and letting them know I give you a lot of grace, and I want a lot of grace from you because we're all human.

Principal C noted:

I love being honest. I don't ever want anybody to think or feel like honest conversations show weakness in people, in someone. I want our staff to understand it's okay to be honest. And because we all want to get better.

Alternatively, study participants also identified experiences when school culture was not positive and negative cultural warning signs existed. For example, a veteran principal reflected on an experience perceived as a decline in the positivity of the school's culture. The principal attributed this experience to the overemphasis of student testing results without simultaneously emphasizing collaborative practices to promote a positive culture:

And this is like the yin and yang of me that I feel; I think culture is really, really, really important, and it's something that I probably didn't pay as much attention to in my middle years as a principal. I think I did early on and then I lost it somewhere in the middle. And I think I'm coming back to it.

In addition, a novice principal expressed the challenges of developing a positive school culture while in the early stages of relationship development with school staff. "I'm trying to mend some cultural things while trying to do the right thing for kids. (It's) always is such a delicate balance."

Another novice principal reflected on experiences of striving to improve the school culture by what the principal determined as increasing the levels of principal collaboration:

Some people welcome and embrace it (principal participation). But for others, it was a little like they didn't want to see the principal as part...of the team. They wanted me to be more peripheral and just make the final decision or give the final word or give the final say. Well, I can't give a final say or word unless I understand all the pieces that are part of it, all the components that are part of it, and the relationships and the needs of the people that my decisions are impacting and so that's really important to me, it's really important. It just goes back to those relationships with people.

Lastly, participants described intentional actions utilized to build, maintain, and communicate the desired staff culture. Principal D reflected on maintaining focus on students in all actions and decisions:

I ended last year feeling like I made good decisions for kids. That I always put students first and I felt really good about that. I knew there were some things that I didn't do well, that I knew I wanted to tackle and work on in subsequent years. But I know I put kids first. And as far as developing a culture as a brand-new principal being new to the building, there was no question with any of the staff members I worked with that I'm always going to put students first.

Similarly, the intentional actions of Principal B included focusing on visibility and support for teachers:

What I have gotten the most positive feedback on from my staff is I know almost every child by name, I know what's going on in classrooms, and I

don't shy away from supporting them with difficult parents and conversations. And that, to me, is a really, really great compliment because if we're supporting kids, and we're doing that together, that's the first steps... And I love it that I know the kids and that they know me, and that they (teachers) don't see me when I come into their classroom, 'Oh, can I help you with something?' You know, it's not like that anymore. It was, but it's not like that anymore. I just walk into classrooms. They don't even notice so it's just about being present and supporting people just with your presence.

Principal A shared the desire to be intentional with communication, collaboration, and providing rationale to increase staff understanding and buy-in:

So many times, I think people are just handed things and they're just, it's just, 'This is what we're doing, and this is the reason we're doing it because it's good for kids.' But I think we miss the explanation in the why behind things. I think if you always have a really strong *why* behind what you're doing, the buy-in is always better.

Principal G also reflected on the intentional modeling of transparency and vulnerability:

But I think it comes down to creating a culture where staff feel comfortable sharing and talking about the concerns that they're seeing in that data and trying not to let it get to a personal level, but like, okay, now what are we going to do about it, you know? I've tried to model that even when I've gotten data that I didn't love. I've shown them data in some of our communication surveys that was really hard for me to show them.

Maybe I didn't agree with it, or maybe because it hurt my feelings or whatever. But data is never a problem unless we're not willing to do something about it.

### **The principal roles and positive school culture.**

The data showed direct alignment of Principal as Engager to the theme of Positive School Culture. As noted in the PDLF, the role of Engager prioritizes fostering a child-centered environment, creating partnerships that support the school's mission and vision, and driving positive change with staff and the school community. Further, the Principal as Engager role protects community values and practices, and develops practices to cultivate staff (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2016).

Positive School Culture also aligns to the role of Principal as Visionary as it directly relates to methods of carrying out the school's vision, necessary for a culture for learning. The Principal as Visionary role promotes collaboration of the school community to work toward carrying out the mission and vision of the school, aligning all practices with the school's vision, and compels the school community to work together to achieve the vision. Further, Positive School Culture also correlates to the role of Principal as Learner and Collaborator. The practices of collaborative decision-making, a community of practice, and continuous growth are all necessary in the development of a school's culture (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2016).

### **Theme 3: Supportive Relationships**

Experiences of Supportive Relationships emerged as a third significant theme from the data analysis as affecting participants' feelings of self-efficacy. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2019), effective principals

understand that the school district and greater school community play important roles in the success of individual schools by allocating resources and creating support systems for school principals. “Effective principals undertake concerted efforts to build positive relationships with district leadership and professional networks with peers in the district” (NAESP, 2019, p. 49).

Relationships with two key groups appeared to play important roles in participants’ feelings of self-efficacy, principal cohorts and principal mentors. Participants’ experiences were somewhat unique; however, all seven participants shared multiple significant experiences that related to the theme of supportive relationships. Overall, data showed feelings of self-efficacy increased when principals identified supportive relationships perceived as trusting, creating feelings of camaraderie, and allowing the principal to express vulnerability.

The concept of trust was dominant in all participants’ experiences with supportive relationships. According to Donohoo & Velasco (2016), “Trust provides a foundation for meaningful discussion and is a key component in shaping the development of cultures of professional learning” (p. 83). They further defined trust as “the willingness to take risks and be vulnerable with others” (p. 84). Participants’ views of trust and vulnerability were threaded throughout responses of all seven participants.

### **Principal cohorts.**

Participants’ experiences as members of principal cohorts were discussed at length by all study participants. When participants described cohort experiences that consisted of trusted relationships, increased feelings of self-efficacy emerged. Clearly, participants described experiences in principal cohorts as beneficial when the principal

felt the cohort provided opportunities for camaraderie, collaboration, trust, and professional learning.

Consistently, feelings of camaraderie were described by all study participants. When asked to describe personal benefits of the cohort model, an experienced principal shared:

I think number one for me would be camaraderie. I think the principal role is somewhat of a lonely role, even though you work around people all day long, you're in meetings all day long, and you're doing things that benefit people all day long. I think naturally there's times in your life as a principal you leave the building and you think you're awful at what you do. I think there's times you feel good with what you do, but you don't have anyone to share that with or bounce ideas off, and I think for me what the (cohort) does is it offers a sense of camaraderie. It's a safe place for me where I can go and kind of unravel or get stuff off my chest that's bothering me. I think most importantly, that's what they do for me.

A principal new to the school district shared the following thoughts:

I think the benefit of the (cohort) is each one of those schools are very similar...I feel like having a (cohort) like this where the dynamics are so similar, it creates a stronger bond between buildings. I truly feel like every one of us wants every one of our buildings to be successful. They're all very, very open to sharing things...It's so nice to know that there are people out there that are willing to help, and I hope at some point, I get to a point where I can be that person for somebody...



Opportunities to collaborate with other principals was identified as a key benefit of the cohort structure. Principal B shared:

There is a lot to be said for bouncing ideas off of someone who truly understands your...kids...and I so appreciate that I get to collaborate with (these schools). It's important to me that I get to collaborate with those people who have the same struggles, opportunities, and troubles I have.

Principal B further noted:

Because I've been so lucky to be a part of this district and to have worked with these great leaders, I have really worked hard to maintain those networks and I could not do it without them. I could, but it would be a lot of picking myself up.

Furthermore, when trust in the cohort group was evident, feelings of self-efficacy appeared greater. Principal D explained:

I think we give total support, non-judgmental. We support each other in a way that is not competitive, and I think that's a really important thing to point out. I think we share ideas and documents. We problem solve through things together because we want each other to do our best work versus, 'Hey, look what I'm doing over here.' It's more like, 'Hey, I put this together, use it if you want. If you can't, no problem.' They're the first people I'm going to call or email if I have a question.

Principal G shared similar thoughts about trust:

I think in every role, you need to have people that you can trust, and you can confide, and you can problem solve together without judgment. And I

think you got probably some of that camaraderie piece, but that relationship is so important. It's important to feel heard, it's important to feel connected. It's important to have a place where you can share together, share your successes, but also share your bumps along the way. You know, we aren't going to get better unless we can problem solve, and then we have to be able to problem solve with people who we can trust.

Principal A shared the cohort as a safe place to share ideas:

I think as far as school situations or difficult things that have come up; I do feel like it's a safe place. When I talk to principals within the (cohort), I don't feel like it goes beyond those walls. I think there's benefit of seeing how other buildings might do something a little bit different. There's been a ton of things that I've ended up doing that I've gotten ideas from other buildings on what they're doing.

Principal E further explained:

I think when there is trust in a (cohort), it's so amazing. It was invaluable... (They are) ...people that were willing to be real with me to not make it look like they're the best principal. I mean, I think that if you're willing, it can be so, so, so powerful, if it's humans being humans together; not like professionals trying to look like they're doing a really good job. Because I think when we compare ourselves to others, there's always more that we could be or should be doing, you know? Yeah, so I've seen it be really, really, really powerful.

Principal F also described feelings of trust:

It's been a group that you feel closer connected with. There's more trust in these principals because you've shared experiences that are deeper than what you might share in, like, a whole elementary administrative meeting. We have shared experiences and we also have varying levels of experience. So, we experience a similar job, so we have a similar context, but then we're able to then go to a deeper level of trust and (ask), 'Okay, but what do you really think about this? Was this a bad move on my part? How can I learn from this those types of things?'

Participants also described experiences learning together with cohort principals as impactful. Principal G described professional learning in a cohort as an important practice:

I think additional benefits include an opportunity to talk about instructional practices to talk about professional development, whether that be for your staff or your own personal, professional development, which I think it's really powerful.

Principal D noted:

I've been fortunate that our buildings are all kind of in the same place as we talked about proficiency scales and learning targets, we were all in the same place. And so that made our professional development really easy. I think what would be hard, is if you're not in the same place, and then you feel like you're getting left behind.

*Challenges of the cohort model.*

Alternatively, challenges of the cohort model were also shared. Challenges that created barriers for study participants included the desire to seek support from principals outside of the cohort, time constraints, and cohorts that continued to work toward building trust amongst the group. Principal G noted:

I think one challenge is it (the cohort) sometimes unintentionally creates more of, I hate to use the word, like segregation or clique. But I think sometimes what can happen is you kind of get with your (cohort) and then you're less likely to reach outside of the walls of that and grow your professional and personal skills. So, I think that's one challenge.

On the other hand, Principal E described reasons for seeking experiences outside the cohort:

The other principals in the district, if they were trying something, I felt like I could go to them. I would try and spread it out so they (the cohort group) didn't know how stupid I was. So, I didn't go all just to one principal. What I found in doing that, like later on, which was really good, is that I found that I actually built relationships with other principals by being vulnerable and asking questions.

Principal F further noted benefits of seeking support outside of the cohort group:

I believe there are great leaders everywhere. And so sometimes you know when you get put into groups, there may be a mix that is uneven or that you might say, hey, I would love to learn from somebody else, but this structure isn't necessarily there for me to be able to learn directly with them.

On top of that, limited time together as a cohort group was presented as a challenge in the cohort structure by three of the seven principal participants. Principal D shared, “You need to have that (time) because it can be very isolating in this role. But sometimes it's hard because you just have so much to talk about.” Additionally, an experienced principal shared how the lack of time together created a barrier toward the balance of getting to know other principals in the cohort, while completing the tasks the group deemed necessary:

I think the challenges are probably the personalities and I don't mean that in a negative way. I mean it and it goes back to you have someone like me who...is more of a kind of a laid back...gets to know how people are doing, not necessarily jump into work. And then you have personalities of people that are ... like, ‘Let's get down to business...We have time for that and then have time for this.’ So, I see challenges in the different personalities and leadership styles that are within and trying to balance that.

Principal E shared the need to continue to work toward trust in the cohort structure:

I think vulnerability is a huge part of trust and so people have to be able to be willing to be vulnerable...When there's central office there? Yeah. And just like that vulnerability and willingness to be like, ‘I don't know what I'm doing.’ It doesn't feel like you can do that.

### **Principal mentors.**

A mentor guides the mentee in his or her search for strategies to resolve dilemmas, to boost self-confidence, and to learn a broad catalogue of leadership skills

(Davis et al., 2005). All study participants considered mentor principals as critically supportive and described these relationships as beneficial. When asked about mentors, participants described district-assigned mentors or self-selected mentors, and sometimes both categories. Whether district-assigned or self-selected, when participants experienced strong mentoring relationships, they expressed greater feelings of self-efficacy.

Participants described supportive mentor-mentee relationships as opportunities to learn in non-judgmental relationship. An experienced principal described, “She always created an environment where I could call her. No matter what time or what day. I think it started with just a comfort level of someone that I trusted and worked with closely.” A novice principal shared, “I’m trying to mend some cultural things while trying to do the right thing for kids always is such a delicate balance and I called my mentors every day.” A veteran principal described the desire to seek frequent contacts with a mentor, “I knew I was so annoying; I would keep a list of all of my questions and then I try and make it like a couple of days without her.”

Principal F described relationships with both the district-assigned mentor and a self-selected mentor:

I called (the district-assigned mentor) often and we talked specifically about... just how we do things in the district. It really increased my understanding of some of the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’...I would say I don’t know how well I would have survived without (the self-selected mentor)...(the) informal mentorship is really what got me through because I could go...ask 100 questions about one specific topic. She had a

good understanding of the history of the district...and (would say), ‘Now let's talk through how we're going to move forward.’ And so that piece was really important.

Principal D described relying mostly on the self-selected mentor and less on the district-assigned mentor, “I think most of it was kind of operational things as far as how to do, what to do, when to do, and my (district-assigned) mentor was extremely helpful for that.”

The desire to seek information from self-selected mentors rather than district-identified mentors was expressed by three of seven participants. Of the remaining participants, two had input into the assignment of their district mentor. An experienced principal noted:

When you're assigned those positions, those principals that are mentors are serving, they have a lot on their plates, too. So, you know, I just feel like I had someone that I connected with really well...and it just was a natural thing to do. And you know, I just knew her better.

Principal B shared the following suggestion for mentor assignments:

Yep, and I lean on (the mentor) for some organizational pieces. If I could make the suggestion that new principals have some sort of say in that because like I had established relationships. And for people coming in brand new...it would be great for him to have someone who's assigned because he doesn't have that network...For people who are moving on in the school district, I felt like I had my network of people and so I didn't always give (the mentor) a fair shake.

Principals also described the importance in having a variety of support professionals to turn to for collaboration. Principal A explained, “If there was someone in particular that I gravitated towards because I liked their vision or how they handle things in their building I made that person an unofficial kind of like ally of mine.

Principal B explained:

I have to surround myself with people who have strengths different from mine. I have worked with two leaders in particular that have stretched my thinking and really helped me grow in big picture thinking and being more strategic with when to present things.

Principal B further noted:

I have amazing mentors in my life that I would not have made it through my first year as a principal without them. All of them have different strengths than me. That's one thing I feel like I do pretty well is surround myself with people who are going to be open and honest with me that see what my opportunities for growth are and aren't afraid to say that.

An experienced principal described the benefits of seeking support from a variety of professionals:

I know one of the principals in the district is someone that I will reach out to just because she thinks a little differently than I do, and she has a lot of experiences. Sometimes when she says things to me, I may not necessarily agree because that's not how I would have done it, but when she explains the reason why I'm like okay, that makes a lot of sense. And then I'm able to almost take that same kind of approach but mold it.



### **The principal roles and supportive relationships.**

The data showed direct alignment of Principal as Learner and Collaborator to the theme of Supportive Relationships. As noted in the PDLF, the role of Learner and Collaborator focuses on a model of continuous growth. Collaborative leadership practices address methods of supporting principals through professional learning opportunities and communities. The Principal as Learner and Collaborator role emphasizes the creation of principal communities of practice that build the leadership capacity of all principals in an organization. The principal cohort is one such structure that provides a collaborative support network for principals. In addition, the selection of mentor principals is a critical component in the development of a novice principal (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2016).

### **Theme 4: Emotional Self-Awareness**

The final theme that emerged from the data is the concept of Emotional Self-Awareness. Foundational in Daniel Goleman's (2017a) work with Emotional Intelligences, emotional self-awareness is described as an understanding of one's own emotions, including what one feels and why, one's understanding of how he or she is perceived by others, and the understanding of one's own strengths and limitations. Skills of emotional self-awareness provide clarity of purpose and decisiveness when one sets a course of action and is the strongest predictor of overall leadership success.

The concept of self-awareness was described by study participants in a variety of ways and included experiences that consisted of perceived successes and failures. Principals expressed greater feelings of self-efficacy when able to pinpoint reasons why their experiences were successful or unsuccessful. The value of understanding how these

experiences changed future actions became a strong predictor of feelings of self-efficacy. Further, principals who felt confident in their personal beliefs, intentionally reflected on their experiences, and were able to maintain focus on the school's goals and more likely to express feelings of self-efficacy.

Experienced and veteran principals who described instances of self-awareness described greater feelings of self-efficacy. As a veteran principal stated, "Knowing yourself makes it easier when hard decisions need to be made." This principal further noted:

Knowledge, so like doing the hard work of knowing who you are as a person, knowing what your beliefs are, your values, your philosophy makes it easier when there's hard decisions to be made, because you can go back to, like, this is who I am at the core. And it also helps you when you're reflecting, of like, when you're not being your true self, and you can be like, hey, you've lost your way somewhere along the way. You got to get back to who you are.

An experienced principal reflected on his leadership style in his first year of the principalship compared to his current style:

I'm a firm believer in leadership is a behavior. I remember when I first started as a principal, I was trying to be probably someone I wasn't. It might have been someone that I admired as a principal that I was trying to be like, and it just wasn't my style. I think once I started to be more of who I am as a person, people funny enough respected that more and I think that it was more genuine...I got way further with that style than I did

with not trying to do something that wasn't me. I felt like I respected it (the other style), you know? I think there's probably a little part of that (style) I wish I was (like)...I've done a pretty successful job; I just find when you're yourself, it's just received way more genuine and you can still accomplish the goals and still have the respect from people...and so I think just what it comes down to is deep down there was probably a part that I stopped and wished that I was more that way, and I'm just not.

Principal E shared, "There's nothing you can do to truly prepare you for being a principal...Until it's you and you're making the decisions, it's a completely different world." The value of experience became apparent with each study participant yet principals new to the role presented similar feelings as a principal new to the school district. When describing experiences as a new principal, a veteran principal shared, "You learn as you go...You just jump into the water and do it." Another principal shared:

Well, coming in, I thought I was strong in building relationships, strong in building trust, strong in building a positive culture. And (now) I have questions on whether or not I can do any of those things. This is one of those things...you question yourself and I don't like questioning myself because then I feel like I don't have a strong belief...I also want to know; how can I serve the staff here? I know they need that so I'm trying to provide them what they are needing.

A veteran principal reflected on an experience perceived as a failure:

And I think it was failure. I think it was getting it wrong that caused me to (reflect). I think one of the biggest ones (failures) was when we were a persistently low achieving building. That was probably like a very, very low point in my career and it felt really hard and we still are not that (high achieving) that's what I think is hard. It's like we climbed the mountain and then the mountain changed so now we're climbing the mountain again. But I think that was when I feel like definitely like my leadership changed.

This veteran principal further explained:

Year after year, and I really did some, you know, deep work on myself and trying to analyze, you know, what is it, what do I have control over, and what can I change to help not have that happen again?

An experienced principal described a pivotal time when focus became the priority:

I was getting consumed with other things in the building. It might have been putting the fire out with a behavior, it might have been, 'Oh, I gotta make a quick call to central office, they've been trying to get ahold of me.' And once I committed to saying, 'You know what, I'm going to be at this PLC.' that made the difference...I told the administrative assistant, 'Here's the deal. When I'm in PLCs, I do not want to be pulled away unless it's an absolute emergency. I do not want to be pulled out of PLC, so if someone calls for me, take a message.' We need to have all voices in the room.

A veteran principal also described the importance of focus:

We didn't know where we were headed and now that is super, super clear from the very beginning of the year. That's how we kick it off and then all

of our staff meetings, all of our staff agendas, like staff development, all of it is *only* our focus. So, if there's something else that comes out from the district that's not part of the focus, I find another place to put that because I don't want us to lose our focus.

### **The principal roles and emotional self-awareness.**

The final theme of Emotional Self-Awareness aligns to the role of Principal as Learner and Collaborator. This role focuses on “modeling reflective practice, confidence, humility, perseverance, and interest in continuous growth and lifelong learning (Hall et al., 2016, p. 8). Further, emotionally self-aware leaders learn introspective behaviors, consider and accept feedback from a variety of sources, and focus on skills related to attitudes, behaviors, dispositions, and decision-making (Hall et al., 2016). Emotional self-awareness is closely linked to self-efficacy as a leader’s ability to understand his or herself and is a critical step toward understanding methods necessary to lead change in a school.

In summary, data analyzed showed four overarching themes, which provide insight toward identifying experiences leading to feelings of self-efficacy in the elementary principals who participated in this study. Themes identified include experiences related to 1) Collective Teacher Efficacy; 2) Positive School Culture; 3) Supportive Relationships; and 4) Emotional Self-Awareness. In addition to the interconnection of themes, the four themes tied closely to the Roles of the Principal emphasized in ASCD’s Principal Leadership Development Framework (Hall et al., 2015). Chapter five builds upon the data analysis to provide conclusions from the data and discussion of recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

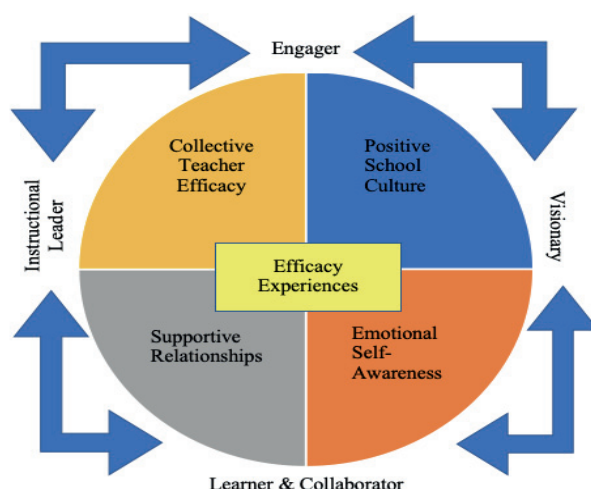
Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010), describe leadership as serving one of two roles, providing direction and exercising influence. In the complex, high stakes role of school leader, the novice principal must quickly demonstrate a wide variety of expertise to guide the learning of all students. To develop these skills, literature shows quality induction programming for novice principals should promote experiences that build self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007). While time and budget constraints continue to create obstacles for public school districts, critical induction experiences are necessary to prepare school leaders new to the principal role. Although current studies have contributed to an increased understanding of the quality components of induction programming, gaps still exist for school districts who strive to bridge theory to practice (Davis et al., 2005).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences critical to the development of self-efficacy of novice elementary principals. A descriptive approach was used to explore this phenomenon through the perspectives of seven practicing elementary principals at various stages of their careers. This chapter provides conclusions of the study and includes a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature. Further, recommendations for practice and implications for future research are also presented.

#### **Conclusions**

Results from the study describe experiences related to the roles emphasized in The Principal Leadership Development Framework. The key roles identified in the

framework include Principal as Visionary, Principal as Instructional Leader, Principal as Engager, and Principal as Learner and Collaborator (Hall et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2016). The themes that emerged, Collective Teacher Efficacy, Positive School Culture, Supportive Relationships, and Emotional-Self-Awareness, provide insight toward answering the study's research question: What are the experiences that help novice elementary principals improve self-efficacy? The results of this study suggest planned experiences aligned to the identified themes promote self-efficacy in novice principals (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Efficacious Experiences for Novice Principals.

### **Collective teacher efficacy experiences.**

This study provides examples of principals' experiences with collective teacher efficacy and the feelings of self-efficacy that resulted from these experiences. Collective efficacy is achieved when teachers have the belief that together they can positively affect student achievement. Educational researcher John Hattie ranked collective teacher efficacy as the greatest factor influencing student achievement (Hattie, 2009, 2016).

Building on that knowledge, Eells (2011) found a strong positive correlation between collective teacher efficacy and student achievement with effect sizes ranging from  $r^2 = 0.537$  to  $0.628$ . Further, when teachers see that their actions positively affect student learning, the impact on student achievement is significant with nearly 4 times the impact (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016; Eels, 2011).

Results from this study suggest feelings of self-efficacy increase when principals experience examples of collective teacher efficacy. Study participants shared experiences of school teams working together with positive effects both for teacher teams and for their own feelings of self-efficacy. An experienced principal described this experience after working to achieve increased commitment from staff:

I think you see it (effectiveness as a principal) through success of a team.

For example, you work with a grade level team and maybe when you started giving a vision, like saying, ‘Hey, this is kind of what I’d like it to look like’ and you had a lot of pushback. You work through that and you become closer as a team, and then as a result, the team starts to see the benefit of what it was you originally were saying. They see success themselves, and then they want to do it more.

In addition, study participants shared experiences of shaping teachers’ beliefs through their own leadership practices. Efficacy beliefs guide teachers’ actions, behaviors, goals, responses, and efforts and can be strengthened through effective leadership practices (Donohoo, 2017). Moreover, Donohoo recognized, “Collective teacher efficacy is malleable and shaped through the cognitive processing and interpretation of events based on causal attributions and the group’s assessment of the



task and competency of the team” (p. 7). An example of shaping teachers’ efficacy beliefs was described by this experienced principal:

I think collaborative practices are one big piece...creating and identifying needs and getting everybody at the table in that conversation...There's no secrets...its transparency from top to bottom. Here's the data. Now what are we going to do with it? Even if we have a bad, a low data point or concerning data point, that's not the problem. The problem would be if we did nothing about it. So how do we then work together to identify the concerns that we're seeing in our data? And then what do we need to do about it collectively? What does that data really tell us? And then what are the specific actions, the professional actions, that we need to put in place to support that change and to make that change for our students?

Furthermore, methods to advance collective teacher efficacy can be developed through intentional leadership practices. Leadership practices that promote collective teacher efficacy include: 1) creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration; 2) empowering teachers; 3) establishing goals and high expectations; and 4) helping teams interpret results and provide feedback. The prioritization of these leadership practices increases the likelihood of success in schools, and can, therefore, greatly impact a principal’s feelings of self-efficacy (Donohoo, 2017).

A novice principal described learning from recent experiences to guide the next steps toward achieving the school’s goals and collective teacher efficacy:

So my vision for my school going forward is that we keep moving towards a common goal...focus on our big rocks and providing feedback to

teachers, for our instructional leaders, and giving them the opportunity to be collaborative with a structure in place for what that looks like at (school name). What does that look like at my grade level, or for me in my classroom and now what does it look like at (school name)? And we're all on the bus driving the same direction in the right seats. We've struggled to adjust to the needs of our kids both behavior and academic...So really having that mindset of we're going to meet the kids where they are and we're going to have the efficacy, that belief in ourselves, that we can get them there.

These leadership practices directly align to the importance of learning from mastery experiences, the most powerful source of efficacy information and the strongest predictor in the development of efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007). As schools experience success collectively, beliefs increase that together they can make a positive difference in student learning. However, principals and school teams must also experience failure to learn ways to persevere and overcome obstacles (Bandura, 1997). One participant described the challenges of establishing collective teacher efficacy with a new staff:

I'm comparing it to where I was before...and this is where we had to go...I'm trying to figure it out...it's been stressful to me because I feel like I'm trying to read our staff and (only) half the staff think, yes, we're going in the right direction and this has been a great year...

In summary, results from the data indicate when principals articulated experiences of collective teacher efficacy, stronger feelings of self-efficacy resulted. Conclusions

from the study also show experienced and veteran principals provided more examples of intentional efforts to increase collective teacher efficacy. Therefore, the goal to establish collective teacher efficacy should be considered a priority in schools, and strategies to achieve collective efficacy should be emphasized in learning opportunities for novice principals.

### **Positive school culture experiences.**

School culture “involves the creation of a cooperative environment among staff within the context of a shared sense of purpose” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 103). In addition to a shared purpose, Marzano & Waters (2009) note when a principal fosters a positive culture, the result is increased cohesion, greater understanding of purpose, and increased cooperation among staff. Further, positive school culture can impact school effectiveness, productivity, collegiality, innovation, communication, and problem solving (NAESP, 2019). Study participants shared a variety of experiences, which provided insight into the impact of positive school culture on their feelings of self-efficacy.

Traditional school structures made efforts toward a collaborative school culture challenging for principals (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). However, the development of “culture-based accountability” positively impacted schools through teachers taking collective ownership of learning through their shared values, behaviors, and actions (Fullan, 2019). In addition, Fullan noted that successful leaders affect the culture of a school and build capacity together with staff by actively participating and sharing in the school’s learning to build capacity together. The principal should work toward achieving the school’s goals alongside staff, creating a climate of learning for all.

Participants described the impact of working collaboratively with staff. This experienced principal stated:

I think specific actions that we take just create an environment where the expectation is, we work collaboratively. No one works in isolation, so everyone is working collaboratively toward the goal of improving instructional outcomes for kids and improving academic achievement for kids and proven behavioral outcomes.

Similarly, this experienced principal described:

I think getting everybody at the table that really needs to be involved in that conversation and to have meaningful conversations about what that data is really telling us and then what we need to do to move forward, whether it be a reading goal or a math goal or writing goal and what we're going to do about it.

Study participants shared the impact of collaborative practices on the school's culture and continuous school improvement efforts. Specifically, participants described the intentional work of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as having great impact on the school's collaborative culture. As Dufour & Marzano (2011) detailed, the PLC process can be used as an integrated means for focused, collaborative discussions between teachers and the principal to influence practices that lead to continuous improvement.

The findings of this study suggest when study participants experienced positive, collaborative PLCs with staff, feelings of self-efficacy resulted. PLC collaboration was specifically mentioned by five of seven study participants. Further, when asked about

meaningful experiences in this participant's development as a leader, this experienced principal revealed:

I would say PLC. About 2 or 3 years ago, we really looked at our PLCs... We kind of glossed over things and you know when you gloss over things, things remain the same, or sometimes can go back a little bit... We started to learn, how do you structure PLC to a point where when people leave (the PLC) they're better for it? We looked at our PLCs as a whole, we looked at, okay, what is the current reality of PLC? Where would we like PLCs to go in the future? And was the principal at all the PLCs? And that was a problem because the PLC is, in my opinion, really the one time a day where you get to sit down with the team. You get to look at curriculum and get to see how they're doing socially and emotionally. You get a lot of insight in a 1-hour PLC.

In response to the same question regarding meaningful experiences in the development as a leader, a veteran principal explained: "I think collaboration, you know, the PLC is that collaboration." Another veteran principal agreed:

When teachers are using data to guide their teaching is another way, and I think the way we get to that point is through our PLCs and having them understand that it's okay to look at your own data. It's not personal and having them be able to reflect on their own practices is another way I feel like you have been successful as an administrator.

An experienced principal went on to say:

We always did some form of planning for PLC, but we were very, very purposeful... We'd say, okay, what is the goal for the end of this PLC?

This is what we want people to walk away with. This is the message and we'd open up with that then we would anticipate questions...and really push ourselves to say, okay, what is it we're asking them to do? And how do you have them walking away from that meeting or that team walking away from the meeting feeling like they can accomplish it, and not deflated?

Interestingly, a novice principal shared the importance of making PLCs a priority, and described PLCs as a key indicator of effectiveness as an instructional leader:

The easy way to check to see if I'm being a good instructional leader is feedback from staff is very important to me. So, feedback I've received from PLCs in particular...was very eye-opening. They feel PLCs are extremely productive. They know ahead of time what we're going to be discussing so everybody comes, they're prepared. It's an effective use of time whether it's professional development or looking at our data.

The findings of this study suggest when principals articulated collaborative PLC experiences, feelings of self-efficacy resulted. Conclusions from the study also show all participants except one connected positive PLC experiences to positive school culture experiences. Therefore, induction programming that provides professional development for principals to support and enhance collaborative PLC practices should be considered a priority in school districts. Beyond that, intentional strategies to increase the

effectiveness of PLCs should be emphasized in learning opportunities for novice principals to build capacity of school leaders and teacher teams.

### **Supportive relationship experiences.**

Results of this study provided a multitude of examples that highlighted the impact of supportive relationships on study participants' feelings of self-efficacy. Principal cohorts and principal mentors were found to be cornerstones of support to study participants. These supportive relationships created experiences that seemed to greatly impact participants' feelings of effectiveness and contributed to their perceptions of their own abilities to determine actions necessary to succeed in the role. As one experienced principal stated, "(I needed to) step back and reach out to our mentors...and ensure that the decisions I was making were aligned with the district expectations. This was really important to me." All study participants expressed relationships with other principals as impactful to their performance in the principal role.

In addition to principal cohort groups and principal mentors, findings also suggest the importance of supportive relationships through shared leadership experiences. Six of seven study participants indicated the benefits of positive interpersonal interactions with school leadership teams. Further, participants acknowledged these relationships impacted their own leadership skills and provided critical insight toward achieving the collective goals of the school.

The concept of shared leadership is noted in literature as important for both the principal's development as a leader and to the school's continuous improvement efforts. For instance, Bambrick-Santoyo & Peiser (2012) identified the establishment of a strong instructional leadership team as the premier task of leaders in efforts to develop a

successful school. The mutual impact of shared leadership in schools was also emphasized by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2019) who identified the importance of principal influence on improved teaching and learning. “These (leadership) teams work together to address challenges and problems the school may face, marshalling their collective expertise to generate durable solutions” (p. 32).

Furthermore, Louis et al. (2010) found greater confidence in principals who indicated collaborative relationships with teachers in work toward collective goals. Collectively, study participants shared specific experiences, which suggested individual growth as a result of collaborative relationships with the school’s leadership team. A novice principal explained:

I think about formalized systems, (and) one of the ones that helped me grow the most was actually just the leadership team within the building... We sat and planned big picture ideas, but then that team would really get into the weeds of okay what's coming up in the next couple months? What does the order our staff meetings look like? What does our staff development look like... Are we ready to push? Do we need to pull back on some of the things that we're working on? And that really helped me... and those are some of the lessons that I learned through that group.

Another novice principal discussed making decisions based on conclusions of the building leadership team:

I would say in the building, one of the things that I did is create a leadership team... and those are the people that I could really count on to make strong decisions for the building, to think things through... and then



we would disseminate decisions out to the rest of the building or ask for feedback.

An experienced principal described this example of making progress toward a shared goal:

Establishing where you're trying to get and then really having meaningful conversations about what are the things that we're going to try to do?

What are those professional actions we're going to try to do and put in place to support our student growth or to support our growth on this goal?

A veteran principal connected success with multiple leadership teams, including PLC team leaders and the overall building leadership team:

The other part would be our team leaders... There are PLC leaders and they've really mostly been focused on the PLC part of it... They know their teams really well. They're the leaders, we meet with them quarterly as a leadership team and to get feedback. It's like that feedback loop to get insight and learn a little bit more.

A novice principal identified the collective benefit of a collaborative relationship with a leadership team member toward the meeting school's goals:

The relationship that I have with our instructional coach has given her the structures, systems, and time to be able to effectively work with teachers because that's our job... I really lean on our leadership team... for what the rest of the (staff development opportunities) look like.

The construct of shared leadership directly aligns to the central phenomenon of this study, self-efficacy and learning from mastery experiences. Results from the data

suggest when principals experienced supportive relationships through shared leadership experiences, stronger feelings of self-efficacy resulted. While principal mentors and cohort groups were significant supports for study participants, building leadership teams provided immediate, ongoing support that related specifically to the goals and challenges of the school. Therefore, pathways to establish shared leadership should be considered priority for novice principals. In addition, strategies to achieve shared leadership experiences should be emphasized in induction opportunities for new principals.

### **Emotional self-awareness experiences.**

Emotional self-awareness is a fundamental building block of emotional intelligence. According to Goleman (2017), emotional self-awareness is the ability to understand your own emotions, what you are feeling and why, and the effects your emotions have on your performance. Self-aware leaders recognize when their emotions negatively impact their performance. They understand how their emotions can have negative effects on people around them, and they are more able to address these negative emotions in productive ways (Goleman, 2017b). And, according to the American Management Association (2019), leaders with the best results in their work score highly on self-awareness measures and exhibit strong skills working with both individuals and teams.

As an experienced principal stated, “I personally feel that...one of the most beneficial things for a principal (to learn) would be the emotional piece of things.” Results of this study show connections between emotional self-awareness and self-efficacy in study participants. Study participants shared examples of increased self-awareness as they gained additional experiences in the principal role.

According to Keyser (2012), in order to develop self-awareness, a leader must develop skills of self-reflection. The purpose of self-reflection is to improve personal practices to inform decisions and become more effective in one's role (University of Edinburgh, 2019). This idea is supported by Hall et al. (2016) who describes four behaviors critical to the development of a leader's self-reflection skills: 1) awareness of leadership context; 2) intentional actions; 3) accurate assessment of impact; and (4) adjustment of actions. As a result, reflective practices are learned over time and care must be taken to develop skills of self-reflection.

Behaviors critical to reflective strategies were indirectly referenced by study participants. In relation to leadership context, this novice principal revealed:

I guess something I feel like I've done well is I can bring everything I do back to what's best for kids. So, whenever I am challenged on something, I first present the 'here's how it works for kids' and 'here's why it works'...but we're in the business of kids and so here's how I can justify that and how it's best for them.

When reflecting on the leadership context of providing quality feedback to improve instruction, this novice principal further explained:

They want you to be honest with them, while protecting their dignity and respecting them, but they want you to be honest. There is such a delicate balance of being honest and building trust with telling them the real truth.

Reflecting on intentional actions for continuous growth, a novice principal indicated, "Being vulnerable and letting them know, 'I give you a lot of grace and I want a lot of grace from you because we're all human.'" Similarly, a veteran principal

explained: “I feel like honesty shows. So, it's not about being confident...it's about being growth-minded and being open to new ideas.”

Moreover, participants communicated using reflective strategies to assess the leadership actions necessary for continuous improvement. A novice principal expressed the importance of intentional in actions to develop relationships with staff:

You know that because people are more and more comfortable coming to you, and it's important they feel valued. Making people feel valued is important. I've learned a lot this year, the last couple years, about just listening. Knowing what people need without them really saying what they need is an art.

Similarly, a veteran principal recognized the need for intentional actions:

So, it's interesting things, like, cycle back around and so that goes back to those relationships and just like the positivity and being their cheerleaders. I underestimated how much, I think, because I don't need that (positive reinforcement) necessarily...but, I feel like teachers need that way more than what I realized.

Study participants also mentioned examples of reflective practices in decisions to adjust their actions. An experienced principal revealed:

My approach on how I do things is I think humor is a huge thing. I always include humor into things, and I think humor is such a great gateway of getting people to...feel comfortable. I never used that when I first started...I was trying to be that very, very structured, rigid person and it just wasn't me. And I think I was trying to catch up to something that I

was never going to be. So, eventually when I started to kind of let my guard down, well, not let my guard down, but I started to see I had more success with it ...I started being more myself, and I actually had a lot more success with it.

Results from the data indicate connections between emotional self-awareness to feelings of self-efficacy in study participants and reveals that the use of reflective strategies can impact a principal's feelings of self-efficacy. Therefore, developing a climate of reflective practices should be a consideration for school districts. Practices including professional learning to promote emotional self-awareness, the incorporation of reflective practices in professional development opportunities, and the allocation of time for self-reflection should be emphasized in learning opportunities for novice principals.

## **Discussion**

Through the analysis of this study and existing literature, the following recommendations are offered as actions that positively impact principals' self-efficacy: 1) prioritizing district-specific principal standards; 2) continuously evaluating principal induction programming; and 3) systematically reviewing principal mentoring programs.

### **Prioritizing district-specific principal standards.**

The question, "How do you know if you are an effective principal?" elicited responses of uncertainty from study participants, including:

Good question. And I think that goes back to, you know, I don't know if you ever really do. I don't know how I don't know. How do you ever really know if you're effective? I think the really effective ones feel like they're not that effective because they're constantly trying to get better.

Additional responses included:

- “(laughs) Oh my goodness, how do you know um, I gotta, I gotta have some process time on that one.”
- “Good question. I don’t know.”
- (laugh) “You don't know. I mean, that's the thing, you don't know, and it's like parenting; you don't know if you got it right.”

And finally, a principal participant shared this response:

Somebody tells you, right? I think it's just a standard, like, I don't know that I'm an effective principal, but I know all the ways that I want to get better and I know the ways that I think that our community wants me to get better.

Leadership standards broadly define performance expectations, generally increase clarity and systemic understanding of the expectations, and largely link leadership efforts to student learning. The use of state or national standards alone may underemphasize features of effective leadership practices (Davis et al., 2005). However, the use of district-specific leadership standards provides specificity to the skills and outcomes districts seek and allows the district to shape its practices around these standards (Turnbull, et al., 2015).

In a position that requires a wide range of knowledge and skills, the adoption of district-specific leadership standards promotes clarity and focus for novice principals. The use of district standards supports the alignment of state standards and district goals thus becoming an integrated part of the continuous improvement process (Orr et al., 2010). Additionally, the use of a common language results in increased cohesiveness,

understanding, and learning outcomes (Manna, 2015; Orr et al., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2016). Further, the continuous review of district standards allows for adjustments as district goals and priorities change (Turnbull et al., 2016).

In addition to clarity and focus, the adoption of district-specific leadership standards promotes differentiation in the development of building leaders. Specific standards allow school districts to create individualized, differentiated professional goals that align to district practices and meet the unique needs of each building leader (Manna, 2015; Orr et al., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2016). District-specific standards also build the capacity of district supervisors in their efforts to provide specific feedback in the supervision and evaluation process (Turnbull, et al., 2015). Moreover, specific standards promote discussion in principal cohort groups and improve effectiveness of mentor/mentee relationships through the specificity of language, goals, and actions (Turnbull et al., 2015).

Future research may be considered to investigate the impact of district-specific leadership standards on principal supervision, mentoring, and evaluation practices. Actions to support such an investigation align to this comment from an experienced principal:

While I thought that I knew a lot of times which direction they (school district leadership) wanted to go or which direction I should go, I was often catching myself, checking to make sure that whatever decision I was going to make was going to be supported and aligned with our overall district goals, expectations, and policies and so, I remember feeling like I needed to double check on those things.

Furthermore, implications of future research could provide public school districts with data to support the alignment of district performance standards to continuous improvements processes like strategic planning and district goal development. Additional research would also inform school districts and states of the perceptions of principals who were evaluated using district-specific standards in addition to the perceptions of principal evaluators. Additional quantitative data would be necessary to determine the implications of district-specific principal standards on teaching and learning practices and student achievement.

### **Continuously evaluating principal induction programming.**

As the field of education changes, principal induction programs must also evolve to meet the needs of novice leaders. Greater attention is now placed on the importance of the principal role, yet principal induction programs are often not prioritized by school districts. According to Gates et al. (2019), “The district’s effectiveness in defining expectations for and managing school leaders will, in turn, influence the effectiveness of those school leaders” (p. 2). Literature shows the need for induction programming that places focus on leadership development, including skills that support teachers, promote learning, and improve school effectiveness (Davis et al., 2005).

Program recommendations for principal induction emerged from the findings of this study and include learning opportunities prior to the start of the new school year. A novice principal shared this idea related to early induction activities:

So, if there was a way to do even that administrative piece a little earlier...even if it was just like a day boot camp with new administrators



led by some of our current administrators. I think that would be very helpful to go through just general processes.

The needs of a principal in his or her first principalship would likely differ from the needs of an experienced or veteran principal transferring from another school district. Therefore, providing essential district information prior to the start of a busy school year could help a new principal improve understanding of organizational learning, such as district resources, practices, and the common language of school district. Principal A shared this experience after participating in a pre-service learning opportunity:

I got to learn more in depth the roles of the different district employees at the time, like student services employees, who is HR, and just listening to them and the things that they deal with. I was able to learn that, you know, those are the people you go to.

Induction programming for novice principals should also include differentiated opportunities that target the specific needs of each individual. Individualized learning aligns to this comment from a novice principal, “I think a differentiated approach might be the way to go with core practices that are shared...there's some things that everybody's going to need to hear as a new principal, but then how can you differentiate?”

In addition to evidence in current literature, results from this study indicate novice principals benefit from induction content that includes collective teacher efficacy, positive school culture, collaborative school environment, effective PLCs, emotional self-awareness, reflective practices, and the development of teacher leaders. Ongoing professional development in the areas of teacher supervision, coaching, and evaluation would also be impactful for novice principals' efforts to improve student learning.

As with any educational program, continuous review with input from current practitioners is necessary for an effective program. As developments in education take place, principal induction programs must also undergo systematic, ongoing change. This was evidenced in the Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative. Pipeline districts provided feedback for future programming, which increased the program's alignment to district practices (Orr, et al., 2010).

Experiences and learning opportunities provided to novice principals in the induction phase should align to the school district's vision and goals, which also undergo continuous review and evaluation. When considering allocation of resources, it is prudent for school districts to allocate money to programs proven to further district goals, including the ultimate goal of increased student learning. Mitgang (2008, 2012) noted programs that focused on the improvement of instruction showed greater success in preparing principals for comprehensive leadership roles.

In addition to professional development opportunities, induction programming should include experiences to increase the collective efficacy of principals. According to Louis et al. (2010), "Collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than individual leadership" (p. 19). Further, school districts should consider principals' collective sense of efficacy as one of the most important resources available to increase student achievement.

Congruent with this idea, study participants shared multiple examples of the power of collective principal efficacy. An experienced principal stated, "Talking with other principals is kind of the way that you seek out some of that PD (professional development)." Likewise, a veteran principal explained, "I learn best from other people,

like relationships and networking...with people outside of our district, but also in our district. We have amazing people in our district, too, and that is how I grow best.

Further, an experienced principal indicated, “I think new incoming principals can learn from experienced principals and try to avoid some of the glitches that we got into when we started to where we are now.”

Future research may be considered to investigate the relationship between specific principal induction program elements and the effects on principal self-efficacy.

Furthermore, additional quantitative and qualitative data would be necessary to determine implications of program components on effective PLCs, improved school culture, the development of shared leadership, and professional growth on performance standards. Additional research into the long-term effects of principal induction programming and its impact on student learning would also be advisable.

### **Systematically reviewing principal mentor programs.**

“Mentors provide a life-line for new leaders to move past situational challenges, refine skills and strategies for long-term results, and understand the impact of decisions in the local context (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016, p. 17). Although a principal mentoring program is a key component of an effective principal induction program, this study provides additional recommendations specific to principal mentoring programs. These considerations support school districts as they strive to review and enhance current practices, improve program effectiveness, and increase the quality of supports available for new principals.

When designing a mentoring program, school districts should consider the alignment between the mentor program, principal performance standards, and school

district goals. Alignment promotes focus and allows for prioritization, critical in a role with such expansive responsibilities. Ongoing program review is necessary to ensure continued alignment with district priorities.

An important recommendation for school districts is to consider immediate efforts to set the stage for trusting mentor-mentee relationships. A veteran principal shared:

I think one of the pieces is just that willingness to be vulnerable and ask questions seems to be a huge characteristic on if you make it or if you don't...Are you willing to ask the questions and seek out the information or do you think you know it already?

Initial training for both mentors and mentees is necessary and should define the roles and expectations of both the mentor and mentee (Wallace Foundation, 2007). Additional training and support opportunities for principal mentors should also be provided throughout the mentoring experience.

Purposeful, careful consideration for the assignment of mentors is recommended. “A thoughtful selection process that matches the mentor and mentee according to school and staff characteristics is paramount to promoting trusting and confidential relationships” (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016, p. 10). Input from both the novice principal and prospective mentors is necessary when determining the best fit. Strengths of both the mentor and mentee and the existence of prior relationships are considerations for school district leaders. This principal noted:

If I could make the suggestion that new principals have some sort of say in that (mentor assignment) because, like, I had established relationships. For people coming in brand new, it would be great for them to have someone

who's assigned because (he or she) doesn't have that network, but for people who are moving on in the school district, I felt like I had my network of people.

The establishment of regular meeting times is valuable for novice principals and necessary for achieving consistent support (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016). Scheduled meetings enable both mentors and mentees to plan meeting topics and maximize time. In addition, critical discussion topics can be determined and also differentiated based on the needs of the novice principal (Wallace Foundation, 2007).

As with overall induction programming, consistent practices for program review and evaluation of principal mentor programs are necessary. Efforts must be in place to insure continued alignment between the principal mentor program and district goals. School districts should seek ongoing feedback from both mentors and mentees for continued program development. Evaluation is necessary to determine if the intended goals of the program were achieved.

Future research may be considered to determine the impact of specific principal mentoring practices, such as mentees input on mentor assignments and reflective practices for mentors and mentees, on growth in principal performance. In addition, the implications of school district size on program components and mentor selection processes could be considered. Additional quantitative data could be sought to determine the impact of principal mentor program components on teaching practices and student learning. Furthermore, mentor program experiences and the length of the program could be analyzed to determine if there is relationship to longevity in the principal role.

The findings of this study have additional implications related to policy and practice for public school districts. With mounting evidence related to the importance of the school principal role, a sense of urgency is needed at a national level for continued study and funding of effective induction programming. With variances in opportunities and programming across states, efforts at a national level can promote effective programs to be available in all states. In addition, at the state level, funding for additional research specific to the state's adopted performance standards could enhance the efforts of all school districts in the state to better prepare their leaders for the challenges of the principal role.

In summary, as the field of education changes, so must principal induction programming. With the potential to impact the learning of thousands of students, school districts must take an active role to fully prepare their newest leaders for success. Supporting school districts in the development of efficacious school principals and providing individual school principals with the experiences that lead to self-efficacy are critical actions to meet the increasing needs of today's schools. "One of the most powerful ways in which districts influence teaching and learning is through the contribution they make to feelings of professional efficacy on the part of school principals" (Louis et al., 2010, p. 127).

Principal induction programming must change in order to meet the diverse needs of today's building leaders. Through the creation of mastery experiences, novice principals can improve self-efficacy with efforts focused on collective teacher efficacy, positive school culture, supportive relationships, and emotional-self-awareness. New leaders must quickly learn methods to develop a culture of collaboration, shared

leadership, and reflective practices. Additionally, the prioritization of district-specific principal standards, principal induction programming, and systematic principal mentoring program reviews are recommended to promote the learning experiences today's principals need.

In closing, a strong relationship exists between self-confidence and leadership success (McCormick, 2001). However, when a novice principal accepts vulnerability and acknowledges all experiences, positive and negative, as learning opportunities, feelings of self-efficacy increase.

Failure shouldn't be feared. In fact, it's integral to growth and improvement. Improvements are seldom won without risk. Changes come rarely without courage. So as educators, we need to call forth that courage to appreciate the inevitability of failure and the fortitude to overcome it (Magiera, 2017, p. 48).

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was your professional path to becoming a principal?
2. Prior to becoming a principal, what specific experiences were meaningful to prepare you for the principal role?
3. In your first year as a principal in this district what were your strengths? What areas did you need to lean on others for support?
4. What is your vision for your school as a principal?
5. How confident are you in sharing your vision?
6. What experiences helped you understand ways to create and share your vision?
7. How do you know if you are an effective instructional leader?
8. What specific experiences were meaningful in your development as an instructional leader?
9. What are specific actions you take to engage staff in your school?
10. How do you engage your community to work toward your school's vision?
11. What experiences have helped you learn ways to engage all stakeholders?
12. Describe an example of change that you initiated. What steps did you take? How did you determine these steps?
13. How do you determine the professional development opportunities for your staff?
14. How do you ensure your continuous growth as a leader? How do you determine your own professional development opportunities?
15. How do you know if you are an effective principal?
16. How are you given feedback?
17. Are you part of a cohort of principals? Describe the cohort. What are the benefits of the cohort? What are the challenges?
18. What suggestions would you make to improve the district's cohort model?
19. What experiences were offered in this district as part of the principal induction program? What experiences were most meaningful? What experiences were least meaningful?
20. What changes can be made to your school district's principal induction program to provide meaningful experiences for brand new principals?
21. What changes can be made to your school district's principal induction program to provide meaningful experiences for experienced and veteran principals transferring to this school district?
22. What additional recommendations do you have for principal induction program improvements?
23. Is there any information you would like to share that we haven't covered?

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