TAKE ME UNDER YOUR WING:
AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THREE NEW PRINCIPALS IN SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Currently in the research literature there exists a dearth of qualitative research regarding the lived experiences of new principals in small schools with mentoring. This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study sought to understand better the experiences with mentoring of new administrators, defined as being in their first three years, in small schools, defined as having a student population of fewer than 500 students. Three new principals were identified through criterion sampling. Each participated in three semi-structured interviews in order to understand their lived experiences with mentoring as they transitioned into and experienced the principalship in their first years. These lived experiences revealed the impact of mentoring, either formal or informal, for each participant. Five superordinate themes emerged through an analysis of the data generated from the participants’ interviews: 1) Constructing the terms of the relationship, 2) the ability to be honest builds that relationship, 3) reaching out and finding them on my own, 4) a more formalized relationship and 5) someone who knows the job. Each participant validated the importance of mentoring although all three agreed that it was difficult to define. They believed that trust was the most important element in mentoring, whether it was through a formal mentoring arrangement or through informal mentoring relationships. Each participant acknowledged the importance of a mentor’s professional knowledge as crucial for successful mentoring of new administrators, again whether this mentoring came via personal connections for professional support or as a result of assigned and prescribed programs for support. The findings are significant for new administrators in small schools as they illuminate a need for mentoring as well as acknowledge it as a missing component for most new administrators in small schools. Additionally, the findings are significant for principal preparation programs and for Central Office administrators in small
districts as they can assist in developing required programs in mentoring, which according to the participants in this study are key components for success and satisfaction for new principals. In addition to success and satisfaction, the three participants indicated mentoring might play a role in retention for new administrators in small schools.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to examine the lived experiences new principals in small high schools have had with mentoring. The study explored the significance new principals in small schools, schools having a student population of 500 or fewer students, afford mentoring in their overall experience in and satisfaction with the job. This study focused on a central question of how mentoring impacts the experiences and satisfaction of small school administrators. Using a qualitative study, specifically phenomenology, through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), emerged as the most salient approach to open up ideas and concerns not previously discussed in the literature on mentoring for new small school administrators. Jonathan Smith (1996) described IPA as having a commitment to examining how people make sense of their life experiences. Using the analysis of the interview data solicited from the participants, I strived to support and expand the observations and outcomes of prior research in mentoring. Illuminating the accomplishments as well as the challenges of new high school principals in small schools, I believe the lived experiences’ data generated from this study would be of value to future principals in small schools as well as their professional training programs. College and University preparation programs for new administrators might enhance their programs to better align theory learned with actual practice in the field through information generated from this study. This study also provides insights for small schools that might be looking for information to develop mentoring programs or to pair new administrators with mentors.
Statement of Problem and its Significance

Given the predicted principal shortage (Reyes, 2003; Daresh, 2004) and the data to suggest the deleterious effects of administrative turnover on school culture and student achievement (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005), the experience of new administrators in small schools with mentoring presents a rich need for further study. Inquiries of graduates from leadership preparation programs often yield similar responses: too much theory and too little application; a request for more hands-on experiences; and a need for mentors (Edmonds, Waddle, Murphy, Ozturgut, & Caruthers, 2007; Fleck, 2008). Olsen (2007) reported that roughly half the states in America now require mentoring for administrators in the first years of service. Hall (2008) writes about several effective programs including The Southern Regional Education Board’s system-wide process of mentoring, the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors program called the First-Time Campus Administrators Academy, the California School Leadership Academy, which provides mentoring for novice building principals and the Albuquerque Public Schools’ Extra Support for Principals. These are just a few among two dozen programs across the country that serve to support new administrators through mentoring.

What remains at issue is a specific focus on principals in small high schools, schools having a student population of fewer than 500 students, which has not been widely studied. Most mentoring programs for new principals happen in larger, urban districts or are components of university leadership development programs (Lambert, 2003).

While mentoring benefits schools (Daresh, 2004), mentors (Hansen & Matthews, 2002) and protégés (Reyes, 2003), an operational definition of mentoring is not agreed upon in the literature (Daresh, 2004) nor is there a consistent theoretical framework for mentoring (Jacobi, 1991; Mullen 2005). There are many forms of mentoring, most notably formal and informal mentoring
programs (Reyes, 2003). Reyes (2003) notes, “[P]re-service principals with a formal or informal mentor were more likely to advance their careers” (p. 54). Further underscoring the importance of mentors on the success of new school leaders, Bloom, Castagna & Warren (2003) reported, “Most principals credit their survival on the job at least in part to a relationship with an informal mentor” (p. 21).

Despite numerous research studies on the positive effects of mentoring on new teachers (Davis et al., 2005), there is scant evidence on such programs for administrators in small schools (Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007). Morford (2002) notes that nine out of ten rural school administrators who did not participate in a formal mentoring program left the job after two years. This study seeks to provide information to small schools about the effect of mentoring programs on new principals and its impact on job satisfaction. This study will contribute to the development of a more full phenomenological understanding of the perspectives of high school principals in small schools. Fleck (2008) reviews the need for improving the connections between theory and practice in principal preparation programs. Using the data from this interpretative phenomenological analysis study on mentoring could be an area where principal preparation programs could be enhanced.

A meta-study conducted by Allen, Eby, O’Brien & Lentz (2008) of 207 articles on mentoring research finds an overwhelming majority (89.9%) use quantitative methods. This phenomenological study will add a qualitative perspective currently lacking in the literature. Focusing on the personal meaning new principals in small high schools give mentoring in their experiences and retention, qualitative research “gives voice” to their experiences (Creswell, 2007).
Research Questions

Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) note research questions in an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study should direct their focus to explore and capture the meaning participants give to a particular experience. In order to identify the impact mentoring has for new administrators in small schools, the central question of the study is “How does mentoring impact the experiences and satisfaction of small school administrators?” The following three sub questions serve further to guide this study:

1. What is the lived experience of a new small school principal with mentoring?
2. What meaning do these principals give to mentoring?
3. How do these principals define mentoring?

Theoretical Framework

Current empirical research identifies mentoring as a beneficial component for new administrators and teachers. Researchers have provided various theories that include mentoring (Kram, 1985; Eby, 1987; Merriam, 1983; Burke, 1984); however, few theories that directly address mentoring exist in the current literature. Mentoring is a complicated phenomenon. Jacobi (1991) indicates that the research on mentoring is relatively light with respect to its theoretical basis. Reviews of the literature on mentoring do not yield significant advances since the assertion by Jacobi (1991). In fact, Ehrich, Hansford & Tennent (2004) find only 15% of the 179 education articles reviewed regarding mentoring as a beneficial force in educational contexts “located mentoring within a larger theoretical framework” (p. 10). Mullen (2005) notes that the
seminal theorists who study mentoring agree there is no single comprehensive theoretical framework used for studying it.

Given the complexity of mentoring and the lack of a consistent theoretical foundation, this study uses Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) as its theoretical framework. Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) focuses on how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behavior (“Attribution Theory,” 2010). Martinko (1995) describes Attribution Theory as an individual’s attempt to develop explanations for their behaviors and subsequent outcomes. These explanations then become the basis for future reactions.

Heider (1958) proposes two attributions – internal and external – to explain why a person does something. Internal is about the person; external is about the situation (“Attribution Theory,” 2010, McLeod, S.A.). Weiner (1995) refers to these causal explanations as locus of causality. Internally based attributions would include factors such as ability and effort whereas externally based causes might encompass factors such as luck or the relatively difficulty of the task. Weiner (1995, 2000) includes two other dimensions – stability and controllability. He defines stability as the nature of the task being more permanent or changeable over time. Controllability, much like locus of causality, is described as personal or external (Weiner, 2000). When the attribution is personal it, again, encompasses factors such as effort and ability. External attributions refer more to the nature of the task at hand, something that is beyond the control of the individual.

The work of Heider (1958) on the processes of attribution serves as the foundation for much of the subsequent work and research on Attribution Theory. The works of Weiner (1995,
2000) extend his seminal work and provide additional insights into internal and external attributions as they relate and to pertain to the individual and the difficulty of a task at hand.

This study focused on how new administrators interpret mentoring and provide insight into any meaning they might attribute to it and its impact on their experiences. Attribution Theory will also serve as the theoretical framework for gauging the impact mentoring has on the satisfaction of new principals in small schools.

Research Design

This study contributes to the development of a more complex phenomenological understanding of the perspectives of new principals in small high schools. For this study, three participants were selected to complete three semi-structured interviews with principals in small high schools, having a student population of fewer than 500 students, in Massachusetts. Criterion sampling was employed with this study. Creswell (2007) notes “this means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposely inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). I solicited participation in the study through an email sent to all principals in the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators Association (Appendix B).

In the qualitative research tradition, there are numerous methods of inquiry related to interviewing that the researcher can utilize (Creswell, 2007). For this study, I used a long interview format employing an interview protocol, which was recommended for qualitative researchers undertaking phenomenological studies (Siedman, 2006; Creswell, 2007). The three interviews included questions on the subject’s background, context for participation and guided questions regarding their experiences with mentoring. The interviews took place at a mutually
agreed upon location between the interviewees and me. Ideally, most of the interviews would have occurred in the school where the interviewee is working. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Only I know the identity of the participants. All recordings are maintained in a password-protected document on my computer. All transcriptions were kept in a locked file cabinet in my office.

Limitations of the Study

While this research adds critical information to the literature on the experiences of small school administrators with mentoring, I acknowledge several limitations of this project. The first limitation is the primary sources of information for this study come from participants’ interviews. Beyond the field notes I took during the interviews, no additional means of data collection, such as participant journaling, were employed. Second, the small sample of new principals, defined as being in their first three years of service, in Massachusetts may not be adequately generalizable to the larger population of the United States. The third limitation of this IPA study is it requires participants to rely of their memories and recollections. Although it provides insight into the participants lived experiences, incorrect or jaded memories or recollections may not accurately convey the original experience but may rather reflect a nuanced view the participant has on the experience in hindsight. Fourth, it asks participants to share authentic viewpoints with the interviewer, someone with whom they have at best a collegial or more likely no relationship. This raises the question of the trust relationship between researcher and the participants. I was able to facilitate some level of trust initially by being a colleague or peer principal, which participants could recognize as someone who intimately understood the roles and functions of the job from the inside. Creswell (2007) notes, “A researcher seeks an in-depth description of a phenomenon. Participants may be asked to discuss private details of their
life experiences over time. This process requires a sufficient level of trust based on a high level of participant disclosure” (Creswell, 2007, p. 238). Despite these limitations, this study represents a sample of new principals’ insights and perceptions about mentoring. As a result, information generated proved useful for future studies.

The final limitations are this study does not seek to analyze the complicated relationships that exist among mentors and mentees nor does it differentiate between assigned and prescribed mentoring relationships, which might be required in a formal mentoring program and those personal connections for professional support which come through more informal mentoring relationships. The study does provide foundational information about the perceptions of new small school principals who reflect on their experiences with mentoring. Through these findings schools may be able to use this information to develop or enhance mentoring programs for new administrators.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Secondary schools across the country face a perfect storm. As demands increase for high school principals, there concurrently exists a shortage of individuals willing to take the job. To make the problem worse, those who take the position are too often not remaining with it. Daresh (2004) observes, “This current century has been met with a recognition that, indeed, the shortage of future principals predicted in the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s has now arrived” (p. 496). The literature in educational administration indicates that the responsibilities of administrators are increasing (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). A 2012 Wallace Foundation Study reveals the average principal’s work day exceeds ten hours. Levine (2005) finds that over the last couple decades the role of the principal has dramatically changed from manager to instructional leader. Today’s principals increasingly must affect student achievement and outcomes on standardized tests (Wallace Foundation Study, 2012). The traditional responsibilities of a manager who orders supplies, makes sure the busses run on schedule, balances the budget, and solves human resource issues now also include the role of instructional leader who supports curriculum development, instructional improvement, and data analysis to improve student learning. Usdan, McCloud and Podmostko (2000) write that principals today say the job is just not doable anymore. It should not be surprising then that the interest in becoming a principal is waning.

One possible antidote to this problem is mentoring. For many years educators have extolled the virtues of mentoring for new and novice teachers. There exists myriad examples on how mentoring has improved the experiences of new teachers; however, a review of the literature on mentoring for new administrators is less rich. The following literature review will begin with an overview of the seminal works in mentoring and will consider the idea of mentoring for new and novice administrators. Specifically, it will include an overview of
mentoring and how it has been applied in education with both teachers and administrators. Finally, the review will end with a specific focus on the expanding role of school leaders and how mentoring might impact the job of high school administrators in small schools.

Given what we know and understand about the increasing demands in the jobs of our educational leaders, this review is significant because it establishes a clear need to improve retention and induction for those moving into critical leadership roles in our schools. Duncan and Stock (2010) note, “School leaders need support and development to help ensure they can meet the unique demands and realities of the students, schools, and communities they lead” (p. 293). This review combines the literature on mentoring and the expanding role and expectations for educational leaders.

**Seminal work in Mentoring**

The concept of mentoring can be traced back long before scholar practitioners began using connotations like seminal work to pinpoint that watershed study or finding in a particular discipline from whence significant subsequent research had been done. For mentoring in the twentieth century, that seminal work was done by Kram (1983). In her seminal study, Kram (1983) posits four distinct stages in the process of mentoring. She identifies these stages as: initial, cultivation, separation and redefinition. Each phase of the mentoring relationship provides for career and psychosocial support as determined by different organizational and psychological elements (Kram, 1983). A more detailed explanation of each phase is outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

The initiation phase generally occurs within the first year. During this time a mentor evaluates a mentee or protégé favorably and makes the determination to enter into a mentoring relationship. In a structured or formalized mentoring arrangement, this relationship is arranged
and does not include the element of choice on either the part of the mentor or the protégé. Through this relationship, a mentee begins to feel supported and valued by someone who is able to provide salient support in terms of career and socialization. As the relationship grows and strengthens, the protégé solicits guidance from the mentor while the mentor provides opportunities for growth and advancement. Positive opportunities begin to result as the initial relationship begins to transform to the next phase.

The next phase is the cultivation phase. The cultivation phase begins after the initial phase and can extend for almost five years. This tests the positive developing relationship, which was forged in the initial phase. The benefits of the mentoring relationship are considered by both the mentor and the protégé. Support in terms of career and socialization is maximized during the cultivation phase. Advancement in career support proceeds socialization support as the mentor is able to provide tasks, projects and assignments to the protégé. These come along with coaching, increased visibility for the mentee and advocacy by the mentor. Like the mentoring relationship, socialization supports continue to improve overtime. These can manifest as increased respect and even develop into friendship. Career support is a function of the mentor’s status in the organization whereas socialization support is based on a personal connection and the level of trust established between the mentor and mentee. The relationship can been seen as mutually beneficial as the mentor can be satisfied with the positive influence and impact he has had and the mentee becomes more confident in his development. During the cultivation phase, the mentee learns the culture of the organization as well as the requisite technical skills required to be successful in the job. As a result, the mentee begins to take ownership of his or her own professional development. The lack of certainty inherent in the initiation phase diminishes as the mentoring relationship and its benefit become clearer.
The third phase articulated by Kram (1983) is the separation phase. Kram characterizes this phase by a significant increase in self-reliance and independence on the part of the protégé. The significance of and meaning afforded the relationship is evaluated by both the mentor and the mentee in terms of its value professionally for both. Both begin a process of separation. This occurs in two levels – structural and psychological. There are implications for the sequencing of these levels. If the structural separation precedes the psychological separation it provides the mentee an opportunity to view his work autonomously of the mentor’s ongoing guidance. If the reverse occurs and the psychological separation occurs prior to a structural separation, the mentee may experience difficulty as he or she may feel unprepared to work without the support of his or her mentor. Also, with a psychological separation occurring first, both the mentor and the mentee may feel the relationship is no longer fulfilling either of them as it once had. Kram (1983) noted this as a period of adaptation. Some aspects of the relationship are no longer needed whereas both parties redefine others.

Redefinition is the fourth and final phase outlined by Kram (1983). This phase is much more informal as the mentor and the mentee maintain connections and communication but not for the career and socialization supports that originally defined their relationship. While the mentor may provide more informal support and counsel, the relationship in this stage might best be described as friendship. The mentor takes pride in the achievements of his mentee’s accomplishments within the organization. He may continue to provide assistance and support as needed; however, the mentee is, in large part, able to work independently. The mentee no longer needs the socialization support that was necessary during the initial phase. Both the mentor and mentee adjust to the changes in their individual needs within the structure and the relationship moves toward termination.
Mentoring Defined

From the seminal work of Kram (1983) many subsequent studies have sought to better define mentoring (Buck, 2004; Bryant & Terborg, 2008; Payne & Huffman, 2005; Daresh & Playko, 1992; Wilson & Elman, 1990). Payne & Huffman (2005) note, “Multiple types of mentoring have been described and examined; they include formal and informal, supervisory and nonsupervisory and alternative forms of mentoring” (159). Bozeman & Feeney (2007) propose, “The few formal stipulative definitions provided in the mentoring literature do not have the coverage or plasticity required for research to move easily to new topics” (p. 721). As a result, the imprecision in defining mentoring has resulted in varied applications in studies where organization learning is considered (Bozeman, et al., 2007).

Kram (1985) notes from her initial work in the area of mentoring in 1983 and as many scholar practitioners who have followed her have observed, the word mentor has multiple and diverse meanings to different people. Bozeman et al. (2007) write, “Often the concepts presented are suggestive, identifying the attributes of mentoring rather than stipulating the meaning of the concept itself, and, in particular, its boundary conditions” (p. 721). This has contributed to the overall difficulty in establishing a firm theory of mentoring.

Mentoring is not a new concept, nor is it limited to the education arena. In fact, its roots can be traced back to Homer’s Odyssey where a sage teacher was assigned by Odysseus to provide tutoring to Odyssey’s son, Telemachus (Daresh, 2004). Historically, in this context, the role of a mentor for Telemachus was to be a tutor, a counselor and, at times, a defender in his father’s absence. The mentor also served the role of disciplinarian. The objective of the mentoring relationship was for young Telemachus to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to become an effective and upstanding citizen (Rosenbach, 1999).
From this we have established an image for mentoring where the older and wiser counselor, termed mentor, provides support and guidance to the often younger and new apprentice, often called protégé. Historically, mentoring could be seen as a form of enlightenment (Williams, Matthews, & Baugh, 2004). It has evolved significantly over time and its application in various organizations and industries is equally as diverse. According to Daresh, (2004) “In recent years, mentoring relationships have become increasingly popular in education and school development” (p. 497).

Depending on the context and application, researchers define mentoring broadly. Ashburn, Mann and Purdue (1987) define mentoring as “the establishment of a personal relationship for the purpose of professional instruction and guidance” (p. 2). The role of the mentor encompasses many areas. He or she should be simultaneously providing support and challenges for the protégé. In the ideal he or she does not simply provide answers nor does he impose his point of view on the protégé. Daresh (2004) writes, “[M]entors are more likely to raise more questions than provide answers to the people with whom they interact” (p. 503).

Smith (2007) as cited in Duncan and Stock (2010), delineates the roles of the mentor as “advisor, critical friend, guide, listener, role model, sounding board, strategist, supporter, and teacher, who asks questions, challenges productively, encourages risk taking, offers encouragement, provides feedback, promotes independence and shares critical knowledge” (p. 297). Given the vast number of things a mentor is expected to provide, it should not be viewed as a unilateral relationship. Many studies have noted the almost symbiotic relationship in mentoring where the rewards of the relationship are shared equally between mentor and protégé (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). Daresh (2004) writes, “Mentoring may be as beneficial to the
mentor as the one receiving the focus of the mentoring” (p. 499). As a result, both parties may enhance the systemic benefits of mentoring.

In focusing specifically on a definition for mentoring in the context of educational administration, Daresh (2004), citing the early work of Walden (1988) writes:

The mentor is a master at providing opportunities for the growth of others, by identifying situations and events which contribute knowledge and experience to the life of the steward. Opportunities are not happenstance; they must be thoughtfully designed and organize in logical sequence. Sometimes hazards are attached to opportunity. The mentor takes great pains to help the steward recognize and negotiate dangerous situations. In doing all this, the mentor has an opportunity for growth through service, which is the highest form of leadership. (p. 17)

This is an area of dissonance in the mentoring literature. There are myriad definitions and finding a singular, agreed upon definition is impossible. Depending on the context and the role, the term mentor has different meanings. This dissonance is why establishing a theory of mentoring is difficult. Bozeman & Feeney (2007), in lamenting a more established theory of mentoring note that “to some extent, the limited progress in mentoring theory seems attributable to a focus on the instrumental to the neglect of the explanatory” (p. 720).

**Mentoring Roles & Benefits**

Perhaps the most critical role in mentoring for educational leaders comes in the opportunity to bridge the divide between theory and practice (Duncan & Stock, 2010). Too often leadership preparation programs do not adequately prepare aspiring administrators for the realities of leading their schools. The role of the principal has changed dramatically from
manager to instructional leader. The expectations for high school principals are monumental and ever increasing. Gone are the days of attending to the managerial tasks of the “four Bs (books, behavior, buses, bats)” (Zellner, Jinkins, Gideon, Doughty, McNamara, 2002, p. 5). These changes are well documented in the literature.

Formal mentoring programs are beneficial. Equally helpful to new employees, including administrators, are the numerous informal mentoring opportunities that take place in school; however, a more formalized and deliberate approach to mentoring must replace these informal networks of casual relationships. Experienced educators have traditionally provided support and assistance to people new to the profession or to an individual school, but specific roles and responsibilities are necessary for effective mentoring programs (Daresh, 2004). Bolman and Deal (2002) report that the relationships between mentor and protégé have received increased attention over the last twenty-five years in the field of education. When done well and in a thoughtful manner, mentoring can extend beyond the direct benefits to mentor and protégé and include positive impacts on school systems and other personnel.

The benefits of mentoring can be extensive; however, like all areas of professional practice, there can also be downsides if not done well. One detrimental area in mentoring emerges when a protégé becomes too dependent on the mentor (Daresh, 2004). Rather than becoming self-confident and self-reliant in his role, the protégé may acquiesce to or become too reliant on the mentor to make decisions. Another area where mentoring may encounter a potential pitfall comes when there is an incompatibility between the mentor and the protégé (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). This can result from a lack of adequate training for mentors or from a mentoring program that does not have clear expectations delineated for the roles of
mentors and protégés (Williams, Matthews, & Baugh, 2004). It can also be the result of differences in philosophy, approaches or beliefs.

Mentors need to be trained to have specific skills. Protégés need to understand the scope and purpose of the mentoring relationship. Cordon and Maxey (2000) as cited in Williams, et al. (2004) “identified the lack of preparation as the greatest obstacle to developing successful mentor relationships” (p. 56). While this lack of preparation could be attributed to a lack of time, resources or available personnel, its deleterious effects on new and novice educators can be extensive. Daresh (2004) cited “adequate preparation of mentors and those who are mentored” as one of the pitfalls and problems with mentoring (p. 507).

**Administrative Mentoring: An emerging need; a specific skill**

The job of the principal is large and ever expanding. Duncan & Stock (2010) write, “Over the past decade, the role of the school principal has become multifaceted, requiring a vast array of skills, knowledge and expertise” (p. 294). The expectations for schools are also increasing in the age of accountability. Perhaps one of the most explicit calls for support for our educational leaders comes from Zellner, et al. (2002) when they wrote:

> In an era when confidence in public educators is failing, recruitment for school leadership roles is becoming more difficult. The desire to lead and stay in a leadership position is not a position of choice; instead, it has become a position of challenge. Even with emphasis on infusion of leadership throughout the school…and de-emphasis on a more traditional managerial leadership style, school leadership has not become easier nor more desirable an occupation. (p. 2)

The data regarding retention of new principals is alarming. Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton & Ikemoto (2012) report that in excess of one-fifth of new principals leave within two years of
taking the position. As a result, administrative turnover has a ripple effect on staff morale, student achievement and school culture (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Zellner et al, 2002). Combine this information with the realization that fewer people are interested in or willing to enter the field of educational administration and the perfect storm referenced earlier becomes a distinct reality.

Over time mentoring has become more widely viewed as an important component for success and job satisfaction for new school leaders (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). Recent reports indicate “over thirty-five states in the United States require these mentoring programs for first year teachers and principals” (Gettys, Martin & Bigby, 2010, p. 97). Despite efforts to improve leadership preparation programs, new principals too often report a disconnect between what they learned and what they needed. A 2002 British study as cited in Duncan and Stock (2010) finds “that only seventeen percent of school principals thought they were “very prepared” for school leadership and ten percent said they were not prepared at all” (p. 296). Despite this concerning feedback, administrative mentors are not required in all states nor are uniform policies regarding mentoring consistent across district in states that currently mandate such a program.

The information for new administrators in small schools is more concerning. Morford (2002) in her paper Learning the ropes or being hung: Organizational socialization influences on new rural high school principals interviewed ten new rural high school principals who did not participate in a formal mentoring program. The results were that after a mere two years nine out of ten new principals had either moved on to other positions or returned to teaching. This is a critical need that must be addressed.
A consistent theme across the literature in administrator mentoring is that a key component to mentoring is socialization (Morford, 2002; Williams, Matthews & Baugh, 2004; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Daresh, 2004). Duncan & Stock (2010) define socialization as “the process of learning the culture of an organization, including cultural norms and conceptions of appropriate and expected behavior…” (p. 298). Crow (2006) articulates it more succinctly when he referred to the socialization process for new administrators as learning “how things are done here” (p. 314). The success of new and novice principals will be contingent, in large part, upon their abilities to negotiate their new context. Without a mentor, they will be left, in addition to the general expectations of the job, to figure this context, along with its corresponding mores, values, and beliefs, out on their own. Daresh (2004) writes, “Mentoring as a part of socialization of aspiring and beginning school principals is a critical responsibility” (p. 504). Unfortunately, not all new principals are provided this support.

Given new and novice principals find themselves in a variety of contexts, the application of the skills learned in their preparation programs must vary. This is especially true for administrators preparing for leadership roles in smaller schools. While leaders in small schools are expected to have the same skills and perform the same job as their colleagues in urban and suburban settings, they lack the peer support provided in larger districts (Duncan & Stock, 2010). As a result, mentoring would make a difference.

**Mentoring and the impact on organizational learning**

Individual studies have considered the impact of how mentoring is defined with how it impacts learning in the organization (Wilson & Elman, 1990). Specifically, Wilson et al. (1990) write, “The subject of “mentoring” has often been discussed, along with the benefits that accrue to the mentee and the mentor; however, the benefits that accrue to the organization that
encourages mentoring within it ranks are referred to less often” (p. 88). Harkening back to the seminal work of Kram (1983), Bozeman et al. (2007) writes, “The early, relatively imprecise Kram conceptualization of mentoring has influenced subsequent work to a considerable extent” (p. 722). As learning organizations, schools today need to consider how mentoring new administrators affects benefits their institutions.

Buck (2004) provides the most salient correlation between mentoring and organizational learning. “The literature supports a conclusion that mentoring may positively impact the development and sustenance of a learning organization” (Buck, 2004, p. 11). How that learning occurs and under what conditions are often the direct result of the type of mentoring program established (Payne & Huffman, 2005). From initial socialization (Allen & Meyer, 1990) to longer-term benefits such as retention and commitment (Payne & Huffman, 2005), mentoring plays a critical role in organizational learning.

In reviewing learning theory in organizations, Morgan (2006) notes “leadership needs to be diffused rather than centralized” (p. 113). In many ways mentoring paves the way for this diffusion of leadership for learning in today’s schools and educational organizations. Kram’s (1983) work on mentoring lends insights into organizational learning as knowledge transmission and transfer occurs between mentors and protégés. While not initially designed to focus on adult learning theory or organizational learning, the work done in mentoring by Kram (1983) in identifying four stages of the mentor relationship – initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition – have overtime aligned with areas in organizational learning (Ragins & Scandura, 1997). From her work, Kram (1983) notes, “Because relationships are shaped by both individual needs and organizational circumstances, interventions designed to enhance relationship building skills and to create organizational conditions that foster developmental relationships in a work
setting should be explored” (p. 623). Mentoring should be seen as the connection between the two. Schools that consider administrator development as a critical component of organizational success will benefit from the use of mentoring for new administrators.

Subsequent authors and researchers have expanded on the stages of mentoring identified by Kram (1983) to explore various functions in organizational learning. O’Neil (2005) extends three predictors of organizational learning – position, context, and type – as viewed through the lenses of the mentoring stages. His study refined the impact of the impact of mentoring by looking specifically at what a mentor does rather than the more broadly researched categories of mentoring. Interestingly, O’Neil found that there was no correlation between one’s position within the organization and the function of mentoring. Bokeno and Grant (2000) who incorporated the works of Senge (1996) and Schein (1990), find that learning in organizations is often about the relationship among the learners. “Understood this way, the diffusion of learning in organizations becomes a matter of the relationships among the learners, where the relationships are what is practiced and the learning is what happens rather than the other way around” (Bokeno et al, 2000 p. 245). They proposed that contradiction drives learning and that individuals alone drive change in organizations.

Conclusion

Given the prevalence of mentoring in the literature, it is clear that it is not a fad in education that will disappear. Rather, it is historically rooted and vetted as a practice that has the potential to tremendously benefit many different stakeholders in education. Emerging in the literature is the promise of improving conditions, through effective mentoring, for administrators, which lead and provide instructional leadership to our schools. Daresh (2004) writes, “The job of the mentor appears to be one that will continue to play a visible role in future schemes
designed to improve the quality of educational personnel in general” (p. 501). For new administrators in small schools, this continues to be true.

As outlined in the review, a majority of states have implemented mentoring programs for new and novice administrators. Many veteran administrators are preparing to retire; they will be replaced by a cadre of administrators who are new to the position (Daresh, 2004). For good reason, these new and novice administrators will need support to ensure success. Daresh (2004) writes, “[B]eginning administrators tend to have considerably more success when they are able to receive ongoing support from experienced mentors” (p. 506). Given the understanding of the benefits of mentoring and the critical importance that principals play in leading our schools, it is imperative that we do not leave our new educational leaders without this vital component for success.

To address the emerging need for more educational leaders, we must also address the reticence why people are not willing to assume the position. Daresh and Compasso (2002), as cited in Daresh, (2004) note, “[I]t was discovered that one of the features of the principalship that often served as a disincentive to people considering it as a career option centered on the fact that people were avoiding the job because they did not wish to take on a job in which they would be isolated and left unsupported by professional colleagues” (p. 509). The implications for attracting and retaining new leaders to our schools are significant. As previously cited, the need is growing but the interest is decreasing. When we add to the decreased interest the increase in expectations, we must take what we know and understand about mentoring and put it into practice. To avoid the storm, administrative mentoring programs must become the norm, especially in our smaller schools. Further studies that correlate mentoring for administrators with their satisfaction in small school settings will be necessary.
Chapter 3 – Method and Research Design

This chapter contains the researcher’s positionality. An important component of IPA research has the researcher as an active part of the process (Smith et al, 2009). The chapter continues with the methodology that was used for the research, as well as the design of the study, and how participants were selected. The chapter concludes with how data were collected and the process for analyzing the data.

Positionality

I am a high school principal of a small, island high school in Nantucket, Massachusetts. Over the last eleven years, I have been an educational administrator at the high school level as an assistant principal and principal at two schools where the student populations have been fewer than 400 students. In neither school as the incoming principal was I provided a mentor in a formalized context nor was there a support network of job alike professionals to provide informal support or guidance within those small districts. As a result, this has spurred my interest around mentoring programs for small high school principals. For purposes of this study, I define small high schools as where the student population is fewer than 500 students and where there is only one high school in the district.

From the outset of this study, I realize I bring a certain biased perspective to the research and risk what Briscoe (2005) describes as “misrepresentations of the other” (p. 24). As a white, middleclass American citizen, I am what Carlton Parsons (2008) identifies as “more often than not, the norm…” (p. 1127). Additionally, a paper presented at the (2002) American Educational Research Association annual meeting titled Saving the Principal: The Evolution of Initiatives That Made a Difference in the Recruitment and Retention of School Leadership identifies the
average principal today as being white, male and around fifty years old (Zellner, Jinkins, Gideon, Doughty, McNamara, 2002). These characteristics match my personal background and identify who I am. Fennell and Arnot (2008) advise researchers to turn their “gaze within” (p. 533); however, I might need to take the opposite approach and be more discursive in my approach and focus more externally. The profession has become increasingly more diverse. Using my own personal and professional experience and background as the only lens to view the work and role of a secondary administrator in a small school setting seems narrow; therefore, I would like to consider how the diversity in the profession in terms of individuals, their gender, background, culture, and experiences, contributes to the discourse of mentoring in this context.

A potential silver lining in the process of looking at mentoring for small high school principals comes in the diversity of individuals in the field who have had similar experiences to mine in transitioning into high school leadership positions. Undoubtedly, the differences in gender, race, demographics and culture will lend diversity in perspective. Briscoe (2005) addresses this with regard to scholarly research when he writes “the greater the number of interpretations, the fuller our understanding of others’ experiences will become” (p. 35). For this research, I see my position as an asset to the research question being posed. My individual experiences to date in two small public high schools and as an administrator in a small independent school prior to that prepare me well to lend insight and perspective to this study. My experiences combined with the diverse experiences of others will culminate in a broader picture of experiences in mentoring for small high school administrators. Fennell & Arnot (2008) pose the fundamental question of “who speaks for whom” (p. 534)? As a high school principal with experience in two small districts, I feel am in a solid position to investigate this experience. Using the variations in the experiences of others will enable me to complete a more
A rigorous study, capitalizing on the nuances inherent in the experiences of others with mentoring. Using the diversity inherent among the individuals will enhance the research results and undoubtedly provide fodder for additional research and study in this area.

**Design of the Study**

Creswell (2007) described qualitative research as beginning with assumptions, or one’s worldview, the selection of a theoretical lens, and the study of problems of practice, which probe the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write how qualitative researchers study happenings in their natural setting and attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the various meanings people bring to them. A study begins with the selection of a topic and a paradigm to frame the inquiry. The topic or phenomena for this study is mentoring. The method to be used for this qualitative study will be phenomenology, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). van Manen (1990) writes, “Phenomenology is both the description of the lived-through quality of lived experience and the description of meaning of the expressions of lived experience” (p. 25). In further describing this tradition, Creswell (2007) writes, “Phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also seen as an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences” (p. 59). This study seeks to make interpretations about the lived experiences of the three participants in small schools with mentoring.

A researcher undertaking phenomenological research seeks for rich, thick descriptions of experiences from the interview participants (Geertz, 1994). The central objective of phenomenology according to Hoell (2006) “is to increase the range of experience and to understand human existence as it is lived” (p. 72). Creswell (2007) indicates phenomenology
does not base its inquiry on the “sciences of facts” rather the essences of the experiences. In defining the qualitative approach, Creswell (2007) outlines the final report includes textural and structural descriptions. Moustakas (1994) adds an additional element to the report where the researcher himself includes his own experiences and how those situations and the context influence the narrative.

There is a wide spectrum of phenomenological methodologies. The one I selected for this study was identified by Jonathan Smith and his colleagues a little under twenty years ago (Smith, 1999). According to J. Smith, Flowers, & Larkins (2009), an IPA study focuses on participants’ attempts to make meaning out of their experiences. The primary focus of this research is concerned with describing the participants’ experiences with mentoring in a small school and determining what meaning they give these experiences. The goal is to capture the deeper meaning or essence these participants placed on these experiences with mentoring as it might relate to their preparation and retention. Creswell (2007) might regard this aspect of the research as seeking the “essentials, invariant structure or the central underlying meaning of experience.” This study seeks to find this meaning through the lived experiences of the participants with mentoring.

Smith and Osborne (2003) indicate IPA is not a prescriptive approach, but it does provide guidelines, which can be flexibly applied based on the goals of the research. IPA consists of three main aspects: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. According to Smith et al., (2003) “Interpretative phenomenological analysis is an approach to qualitative, experiential, and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (p. 11). Brocki & Wearden (2010) in citing Smith (2004) describe “IPA as phenomenological in its principle focus
on the individual’s experience (Smith cites Giorgi A. & Giorgi B., 2003) and ‘strongly connected to the interpretative or hermeneutic tradition (Palmer, 1969)’ (p. 40) in its recognition of the researcher’s centrality to analysis and research” (p. 88). This study aims to explore these three areas through the lenses of the participants’ experiences.

**Data Collection**

The participants for this research project were solicited via the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators Association (MSSAA) email list. Criterion selection was employed to select three participants who were in their first three years of being an administrator in a secondary school with a student population of fewer than 500 students. The selected participants were not personally identified in the data collection process. All participants in the study were provided the opportunity to elect to remain anonymous. While their identities were known to me, I agreed to provide pseudonyms for them and to refrain from disclosing any information that would identify their schools or them. The interviews were audio recorded using a laptop computer with Skype recording technological capabilities. The recordings were then uploaded to my personal computer, which remains password protected. Field notes gathered during the interviews are kept in a securely locked file cabinet in my office. All written materials that were generated through the interview process did not disclose the identity of the participants nor did they reveal the location of the interviews. After successful transcription, the original audio recordings were maintained under the password-protected file on my computer. The field notes, stripped of any identifying information, remain in my custody under lock and key.

Using and Connelly and Clandinin (2000) and Smith et al. (2009) as guides, I collected data by audio recording the interviews as well as scripting the answers given by the participants. I collected data through a series of three semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately
one half hour each. Informal connection with the participants via phone calls and emails was ongoing throughout the research process. I took notes during each phone call. These notes were later used along with the printed emails as a mean for triangulation to help ensure trustworthiness in the study. Additional information about this has been included in the section on trustworthiness.

Prior to beginning the interviews, I engaged each participant in casual conversation to build rapport. Essentially, rapport involves trust and respect for the interviewee as well as the information shared. It was also the means of establishing a safe and comfortable environment for sharing personal experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). We shared information about what was happening in our schools. Many similar issues were shared between us. For example, as the end of the academic year was imminent, each of us was preparing for graduation. In talking casually about our schools, I was able to identify with each participant as a colleague who was involved in many of the same enterprises as they were. This helped to establish and to build trust.

When it was time for the interview to begin, I welcomed the participant. Next, I reminded each participant about the purpose of the study and the fact they could elect to terminate participation at any point. The central question of the study - How does mentoring impact the experiences and satisfaction of small school administrators? – was used to help guide the interviews. In order to identify the impact of mentoring for new administrators in small schools, the following sub questions served as a foundation for these interviews.

1. What is the lived experience of a new small school principal with mentoring?

2. What meaning do these principals give to these experiences?
3. How do these principals define mentoring?

Specific questions that were used in each of the three interviews can be found in Appendix A.

I informed the participants that the sessions would be audio taped using Skype recording technology and written notes would be taken for the purposes of transcription. I reminded each participant that the interviewee’s privacy would be protected. Participants would never be identified by name. I also informed each participant that all transcribed records, audio recordings, and field notes would be securely stored for the period of this study.

Each interviewee was provided the questions for the interviews prior to meeting. As a result, each participant was perhaps better able to speak freely and openly about the experiences with mentoring. Through active listening and content reflection, the participants were able to address many of the issues involved in the research. At the conclusion of the interviews, the participants shared with me that they enjoyed sharing their lived experiences with mentoring; each expressed he was happy to have been given the opportunity to talk about these experiences with me.

After completing the interviews, I reviewed the recordings by listening to them several times. I did this initially to ensure that each recorded Skype interview had been captured correctly without any glitches in the technology or the recording. After I was confident that the sessions had been recorded correctly, I sent the files electronically to a transcription service. The company transcribed the interviews verbatim and completely. To ensure that the company had accurately transcribed the interviews, I listened to the audio files as I read the transcriptions. Additionally, I sent each of the participants a PDF file of the transcribed interviews for them to
review. I invited them to clarify anything in the transcriptions they felt was not accurate. The transcribed interviews were kept under a password protected file on my computer.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in IPA studies does not try to fit the research findings into existing theoretical frameworks. This is distinct when compared with other qualitative research traditions. Smith et al. (2009) writes, “IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. Its aim is to conduct human lived experience examination in a way that enables the experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems (p. 33). Current literature on analysis relative to IPA does not prescribe any single method for working with data; however, Smith et al. (2009) and colleagues recommend using several strategies. In analyzing the data for this study, I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as outlined in Creswell (2007). This method, described by Moustakas (1994) uses the following six steps, as modified by Creswell (2007):

1. The researcher describes his [sic] own personal experiences, in this case in being mentored, with the phenomenon being studied. Creswell (2007) defines this as creating an “epoche.” This permits the readers to better understand the researcher’s personal experience and how it might impact the study.

2. Reading through the transcribed interviews, the researcher develops a list of significant statements regarding how the participants are experiencing mentoring. Creswell (2007) defines this as horizontalization of the data (p. 159).

3. The researcher takes significant statements and groups them into larger units or themes. Miles & Huberman (1994) describe this step in the initial phases of working with data as data reduction.
4. The researcher writes a “what” description using verbatim examples from the participants’ interviews about what they experienced with mentoring. Creswell (2007) calls this the “textural description” (p. 159).

5. The researcher writes a “how” description of the setting and context in which the participants experienced mentoring. Creswell (2007) refers to this as the “structural description” (p. 159).

6. Finally, the researcher writes a composite description of the participants’ experiences with mentoring, which incorporates both the textural and structural descriptions. This provides the “essence” of a phenomenological study.

**Trustworthiness**

This particular study was limited to a very small sample population of principals in Massachusetts. The overall aim was not to generalize the findings but to provide a description of the specifics within the context of mentoring. Creswell (2007), in citing Polkinghorne (1989), discusses validity in phenomenological research. “To him, validation refers to the notion that an idea is well grounded and well supported” (p. 215). Creswell (2007), in further explaining validation in qualitative research indicates it is a process where the researcher has made every attempt to assess the findings. One approach used to ensure validity and trustworthiness in this study was through using the three interview structure provided by Seidman (2006). According to Seidman (2006) “the three interview structure incorporates features that enhance IPA study validity” (p. 24). Rather than a single interview, the multiple interviews over time provided me with an opportunity to check for internal consistency in what participants said. This increased trust in the comments made (Seidman, 2006).
Another approach employed by this study to enhance trustworthiness was triangulation. According to Creswell (2007) triangulation involves a researcher examining different data sources. I used these to establish justification for emerging themes. In this study, I used multiple forms of communication – interviews, emails, note taking, and phone calls – to establish triangulation from the data.

Finally, in this study, participants were given the transcribed interviews to review as a means to ensure trustworthiness in the process. Member checks were utilized as participants were solicited to provide their views on the credibility of the findings and interpretations. Once they reviewed the rough drafts, alternative language in one instance was used to accommodate the participant’s view. Creswell (2007) indicates member checks add to the validity of a study.

I also engaged in and employed a peer review. I provided a colleague in the Northeastern University College of Professional Studies doctoral program the audio of the interviews in addition to the transcribed interviews. Again, no identifying information about the participants or their institutions was available to this colleague. I worked with the colleague as an external check to provide feedback and insight on my interpretation of the interviews. The colleague, a principal at a small high school near the researcher, recently completed a thesis using phenomenology and was familiar with the research being conducted on mentoring.

Summary

Chapter three provided an outline of the design process used for this phenomenological study on mentoring. I provided the methodology, the process for data collection and the process for data analysis as well as the steps undertaken to ensure trustworthiness.
Chapter 4 – Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of new principals with mentoring in small high schools. The participants were able to provide rich descriptions of their experiences, specifically explaining how mentoring – either formally through a prescribed program mandated by the school or district or informally through personal or professional connections – impacted the transition to the principalship and their overall satisfaction in the role currently. Through analyzing the transcripts from the interviews, five superordinate themes and two sub-themes emerged: 1) Constructing the terms of the relationship (1.1 the process, 1.2 the person), 2) Navigating the uncertainty of confiding challenges to a more senior colleague, 3) Leveraging established personal connections for professional support, 4) Assigned and prescribed professional support and 5) Support for growing in the role. The themes and sub-themes illustrate the experiences each participant had with mentoring and the meaning they afford those experiences as principals in small high schools. They further illuminate how mentoring has impacted the principals’ satisfaction in the role. Verbatim quotations are used throughout the analysis to illustrate the superordinate and sub-themes.

I started by using a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as outlined by Creswell (2007) to analyze the data; however, I further modified this method in order to better present the participants’ lived experiences with mentoring. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe the data analysis process in IPA as iterative and inductive. They note that there is no single prescribed or preferred method for data analysis. They suggest several steps for use in analysis for researchers who are new to IPA. Using the further modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method for data analysis and the strategies and considerations put forward by Smith et al. (2009), I began with bracketing. Smith et al. (2009) referred the process of bracketing as a reflection on
the researcher’s own perceptions. The chapter continues with an individual profile for each participant. I then provide an exploration of the themes that I gathered from the data analysis.

Bracketing

I began the process of data analysis by working to clear my mind through the process of bracketing (Creswell, 2007). I ruminated on my own unique experiences with mentoring, both personal and professional. My overall experiences with mentoring have been both positive and negative. During the process of bracketing (Creswell, 2007), I vividly recalled three distinct mentors. Part of the graduate program in educational leadership at The Harvard Graduate School of Education was to spend a year working alongside a practicing principal in a mentoring program. Coming from Kentucky, I was very unfamiliar with schools around Boston and Cambridge so I blindly began applying to schools close to campus. I interviewed with a Head of School in a community that was nearby the University and was selected by him to participate in the internship and mentoring program at his school for the year. He would be my first official mentor and the arrangement would be very prescribed and formal.

It did not take long to realize that I had been selected solely for the purpose of being introduced as “my intern from Harvard.” The principal did not provide me many opportunities for growth or learning beyond what was required by the program. One of his associate principals recognized this and began providing me opportunities to work with her. Looking back, she would be considered to be my first informal mentor. She gave me projects to do, presentations to prepare and students and faculty with whom to work. I learned a good deal from her as she built time in each week to engage in conversation about the work she was having me do. She did
not simply give me answers but challenged me to think about each task as it pertained to a bigger picture of our work.

I also learned from her how to negotiate the politics of education. As I was there as the Head of School’s intern, I needed to cautiously negotiate his lack of interest in formally mentoring me along the guidelines provided by the program and the pleasure he derived in being able to tell people he had an intern from Harvard. The dynamics of that situation helped me to begin to understand and appreciate the differences between formal mentoring programs and informal mentoring relationships.

My next mentor was a Head of School who I recalled negatively mentored me in my first job right after graduate school. Her actions and style of leadership steered me in ways I determined never to lead a school. My relationship with her was not supportive but I was tied to her through a prescribed and structured mentoring relationship, which at the time was required by the school where I was employed. As part of the prescribed mentoring program, we were required to meet weekly. These meetings generally divulged into a litany of things I was doing wrong or incorrectly and areas where I needed to improve. Interestingly, these were not two-way conversations. They were a subjective analysis made by her based on how she would have been doing the role – Dean of Students – for which she had hired me. Any deviation from what she considered to be the best way to do something was met with harsh criticism about my lack of experience and professional judgment.

The dynamics of her being my immediate supervisor as well as my assigned mentor exacerbated a lack of trust I came to feel through the relationship. As a result, we did not build much of a relationship. I did not trust her and grew to resent the prescribed, structured
mentoring program. To this day, I am not sure I have resolved my animosity for her and for being held, what I perceived to be captive, in an assigned and prescribed program. It soured my feelings about who a mentor was and what the relationship was supposed to achieve. I believe my inability to reconcile much of that experience would have destroyed my appreciation for the value of mentoring had I not had a second opportunity to participate in a mentoring relationship with someone who understood the interpersonal and psychological dynamics required to build a relationship first, which would successfully build a foundation from which to be a mentor and to do the working of mentoring.

The second individual is someone I still consider to this day to be my mentor. While never engaged in an assigned or prescribed, formal mentoring relationship, this mentor hired me as an assistant principal with the expressed commitment of preparing me to become the principal when he retired. In the initial interview for the assistant principal’s position, he disclosed that he was looking to hire someone with whom he could partner. He was looking for someone he could invest in and prepare to become the next principal of the small school where he was working. He wanted a colleague, co-leader, protégé and friend with whom he could “laugh, cry, share, and do the hard-work of leading today’s rural secondary schools.” From our first day of working together through until his retirement, he made good on that promise and capitalized on his investment in hiring me.

That mentoring relationship lasted four years until the mentor’s retirement; however, the personal relationship extends to the present. I still reach out to my mentor and professional and personal friend for advice and counsel. As a result of this positive experience, my feelings about mentoring and the value of the relationship a mentor and mentee can have has changed dramatically. The experience of a more informal and personal mentoring arrangement helped to
alleviate some of the negative feelings I had developed from my prior mentoring experience as a new administrator. So positive was this experience that I have also served as a mentor to several teachers and aspiring administrators over the last several years. I work to emulate what I experienced so other emerging leaders can benefit from what can be the positive power of mentoring. These experiences drove my interest in studying mentoring for new administrators in small high schools at an academic level and convinced me of the importance of putting the research in this field into practice. I see the value in ongoing mentoring for administrators. To date, I continue to reach out to trusted colleagues for mentoring support. I, also, work to provide mentoring for new and aspiring administrators. I am able to do this through my work with the MSSAA.

Profiles of Participants

The following section contains profiles for the three participants in this study. While all three participants fit the selection criteria of being from a small school – defined as having a student population of fewer than 500 students – and were in their first three years as an administrator new to that school, their background and experiences in education leading to the principalship helped me to understand better their lived experiences with mentoring and to provide a foundation for the themes, superordinate and sub, which emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. All names are pseudonyms.

Erik. Erik is a first year principal in a rural community in Western, Massachusetts. He is the youngest of the three participants in this study. His school serves approximately 200 students in grades seven through twelve. He is unique to the study in this sense as the other two
participants’ schools were structured grades nine through twelve. Prior to becoming a principal, Erik served as a vice-principal and a teacher in an alternative school, also in Massachusetts.

When asked about his experiences leading to the principalship, Erik talked about his family and a history of military service and education. His brother, after graduating from high school, went into the service and then became a teacher. Following in his brother’s footsteps Erik first went into the military and then studied education. After serving in Afghanistan and being honorably discharged from the Marines, Erik pursued studies in education at a state university in Massachusetts. After graduating with a degree in educational administration, he got his first job in an alternative school, where he worked for three years as a teacher. He then became a vice-principal at another school before moving into the principalship the following year.

He described his decision to become a principal by saying “it’s just kind of what I wanted to do. I had a good relationship with my principal and I kind of saw what his role was within the school and I knew that’s what I wanted to do.” Compared with the other two participants in the study, Erik’s decision seemed very nonchalant. He began his tenure in school leadership as a vice-principal. When the opportunity to become principal presented itself, he applied but did not get the position; however, the person who became principal only stayed one year. Erik applied again and got the job. All of this occurred at the same school where he is now serving as the principal.

Kevin. Kevin is a second year principal of a small high school serving just over 250 students in Central Massachusetts. Kevin is from the community where he serves as principal, having been a student himself at this high school. In addition to attending the high school as a student, he worked there as a guidance counselor for two years and served as Assistant Principal
for five years prior to his current position as building principal. Additionally, he previously worked as a guidance counselor in a larger, more urban school in Massachusetts.

Of the participants in this study, Kevin has received the most formal education. He completed his doctoral degree prior to becoming a principal, which was a source of great pride. “I have my doctorate in education leadership and have loved my life ever since.” His continuing education contributed to a “light bulb” moment when he decided that leadership was something he might be interested in pursuing. His original intentions were to take his background in guidance and to become a private for-profit college counselor. Through his doctoral studies, Kevin became more intrigued by the impact he could have in education through being a school leader. This came as somewhat of a surprise to Kevin. He described his journey in becoming a principal as something he did not originally set out to do. He specifically noted:

So, uh, it wasn’t my lifelong goal to become a principal. Uh, it was initially just to stay in guidance and help the kids, and then through my doctorate program, that’s when I decided that maybe it is right for me to slide over into admin.

According to Kevin, his experience as a school counselor served him well in preparing for the role of the principalship. As a school counselor, Kevin often needed to work on relationships with various constituents in the school. Whether it was an issue between students or between a student and a teacher, Kevin had myriad examples where he was called upon to foster or even mend relationships. He believed his background in personal relationship building has served him well in the principalship as he drew various parallels in relationship building between the two roles. His experience in fostering relationships among diverse personalities and people he believes is one element of success for him. Another support that Kevin enjoyed that
the other participants did not was he was very familiar with the community where he became principal. As noted earlier, Kevin was as student at the high school where he now serves as principal. He returned to the community where he had attended school himself when there was an opening in the guidance department. He wanted to return to his small town because of his positive experiences at the school as a student and the solid relationships he had established over the years.

**Austin.** Austin is a third year principal of a high school that serves approximately 300 students on the North Shore of Boston in Massachusetts. He has had an extensive career in education, spanning some twenty-five years. He began his career as an art teacher in New Hampshire. He has been a Fine Arts Director and an Assistant Principal in his current district. Prior to those leadership positions, he served as an Associate Principal of a Middle/High School configuration in the same district.

Austin brought the most experience in the field of education to the study. His career before becoming a principal included more than twenty years as an educator and as an associate administrator in various roles and configurations. He was the oldest participant in the study. He noted his age in the initial interview as he was describing his journey to becoming an administrator at a small school. “I am going to turn fifty this summer; I think I sought it [the principalship] for a lot longer than a lot of other people.” He was also the most seasoned administrator, having two years’ experience in the principalship. Unlike Erik, Austin was very deliberate and purposeful in his decision-making process to become a building principal. Along the way, Austin developed the confidence to become an administrator by observing how the work was being done by others in the role. These observations were not always positive. According to Austin:
I think that’s what pushed me to look at going into a building leadership position. When I thought about it I said ‘Okay, I can do this and this… if I do this, it will be better and it will be these things and not those things.’

As Austin ruminated on his experiences leading to the principalship, he shared that sometimes learning for him came from seeing how not to do things. While he was not speaking specifically about mentoring and would not have identified the people about whom he was speaking as mentors in the traditional sense of the term, he talked about how he would observe the actions of others in leadership and reflect on how they were doing things. Almost learning from their mistakes, Austin approached the transition to the principal’s position by consciously avoiding doing things he had seen others do poorly.

**Constructing the terms of the relationship**

While all three participants were able to offer their personal ideas and conceptualizations of mentoring, they each offered unique and often times personal reflections on how to define the term. As a result, a divergence in defining the term began to emerge. As they articulated a definition for mentoring, it became clear that each participant was offering information both about the process of being mentored as well as ideas about the relationships with the mentor as a person. This was not merely a difference in semantics. For all three, defining mentoring included both the process and act of being mentored as well as the personal attributes of a mentor. Under constructing the terms of the relationship, two sub-themes – the process and the person – emerged.

Consistent with the preponderance of the literature on mentoring, this superordinate theme exemplifies the difficulty inherent in finding a consensus definition for mentoring. As
noted in the literature review in Chapter Two, one of the most problematic issues with mentoring comes in being able to attach a specific definition to it, as it has varied meanings in different contexts as well as diverse meanings to the individuals participating in it. The formulation of a Theory of Mentoring has been made more difficult as a result of not being able to arrive at a singular definition of the phenomena.

**Guides you in a positive direction**

All three participants shared that the process of mentoring was in part building a relationship. Erik was the only participant who was assigned a mentor as part of his transition to the principalship. His District required a prescribed mentoring program. Not surprisingly, as he talked about mentoring, Erik shared he would define mentoring as a “formalized relationship.” Unlike Kevin, he did not specify how long the relationship would last outside of what was prescribed by his District. Kevin specifically noted “mentoring needs to be a long-term relationship.” Austin shared that the process of being mentoring needed to include “a personal connection.” Each provided insights into the process of mentoring, what it was and how it should be structured.

As Kevin and Austin did not participate in a formal mentoring program in their Districts, their ruminations on the process of mentoring included elements of choice. Kevin felt the process of mentoring included an individual who he knew would “take [you] under his wing and show you the ropes.” This was a consistent idea about mentoring shared by all three. The process of mentoring for them needed to include being shown various aspects of the job of being principal. All three agreed that the job of being a principal was complex and multifaceted. As a result, the process of mentoring should include components of being taught
about or guided through the various roles of the position. Each spoke about different facets of
the job – budget, scheduling, personnel issues and evaluation – where a mentor would help
them to process the role.

There were specific components of Erik’s program where he and his mentor were
required to get together. As a result, Erik took a less personal view of the process of mentoring.
Erik believed mentoring should take on the role of facilitation. He said “mentoring facilitates
and guides you in a positive direction.” Austin also shared the belief that mentoring should
facilitate the growth of the new principal. In addition to facilitating, Austin said mentoring
should “help you grow and learn and guide you in a positive direction.” It is interesting that
both Austin and Erik used positive direction to discuss the process of mentoring. Each
participant was able to share anecdotal examples of positive experiences he had as a result of
being mentored, either formally through an assigned program or casually through informal
relationships, although Kevin did not specifically use the phrase “positive direction” when
describing the process of being mentored.

All three shared a steadfast belief that the process of mentoring should be beneficial for
both the mentor and his protégé. Whether formally assigned or informally selected, the
participants felt participating in mentoring should result in support for the new principal. Kevin
talked about mentoring as a process of acculturating the new principal to the school and the
position. He specifically mentioned the process of mentoring should “help us fit our new
roles.” Erik agreed and believed that the mentor should help the new principal to negotiate the
diverse roles being expected of him. He cited specific examples like the budget process and
scheduling as areas where a new principal would need a qualified mentor. Austin also agreed;
however, he added a component of negotiating the culture. Austin felt a mentor should help his
protégé to understand the community where he works. This was discussed to a lesser extent with Erik but he did share that learning the culture of the school and community was an aspect of the process of mentoring which he felt was important. Perhaps because of his familiarity with the community, district and school, Kevin did not reflect on this aspect of the process of mentoring.

**Experienced, practicing professional**

While all participants were able to provide definitions for mentoring as a process, each recognized that separating the process from the person was difficult. As they articulated their ideas about mentoring, they converged on descriptions of the person who was providing mentoring. Although sometimes agreed upon personal attributes, the person as mentor often provided for unique and personal definitions based on the lived experiences for each participant.

Experience was a shared characteristic noted by all three participants. Erik felt that in order for a mentor to be effective, he needed to have experience with what he was mentoring. Fortunately, in his formal mentoring relationship, Erik was paired with an individual who had both experience in building level leadership as well as experience in the district where Erik was working. His name was well-known and when Erik would talk to others about him, he would receive good feedback. This was important to Erik. Name recognition was something he noted frequently when talking about the mentor the district assigned to him when he started.

Kevin also talked about experience in the person of the mentor as someone who is a “practicing professional.” Kevin felt the person needed to have a strong knowledge base of the field and of the position. Austin echoed those thoughts on the person who is providing mentoring. They both selected people to mentor them informally through their personal
connections whom they felt had the knowledge and experience to guide them positively and professionally.

Each participant, in defining mentoring, used adjectives to describe the person who provides mentoring. Among the most popular adjectives beyond the personal characteristics of experienced and knowledgeable were supportive, honest, and trustworthy. While all three lauded the importance of feeling comfortable with the person who was mentoring them, Erik was most articulate as he did not have a choice in the person who became his mentor. Erik described himself as a skeptical person. He noted that while his assigned mentor had good name recognition and a solid reputation, he was most interested in whether he would be able to be honest with him and trust him. Kevin and Austin also shared the need for trust in the mentoring dyad. So often was navigating the uncertainty of confiding challenges to a more senior colleague articulated in defining mentoring that it emerged as a superordinate theme.

**The ability to be honest builds that relationship**

All three participants extolled the importance of honesty and trust in the mentoring relationship while at the same time recognizing the uncertainty in sharing too much information about their difficulties and challenges as a new administrator. Whether through an assigned mentoring program like Erik did or in an informal mentor/mentee arrangement through personal connections such as the one Austin and Kevin engaged, trust was an integral component identified by each as having a profound impact on the value of the process of mentoring. All three shared reservations about confiding any challenges or difficulties they might be having as a new administrator with someone in the District who was more senior than they. To this point, Kevin noted, “I think the conversations that a mentor and a mentee have should remain
confidential.” The participants agreed that in order for mentees to feel comfortable disclosing areas where they felt they were not meeting standards, they needed to believe that their disclosures were confidential and could trust that the mentor would use that information to help them grow. Austin specifically indicated, “I think a mentor is willing to tell you the truth as nicely as they see it.” No one felt that a mentor should tell new principals what they wanted to hear, but would share information for growth and improvement in ways that would build trust.

In order to build trust in the relationship and to be open to sharing challenges, Kevin does not believe a mentor should be evaluative; however, he does feel there should be a level of honesty in the relationship that allows the mentor to provide critical feedback. It was interesting to listen as Kevin discussed how to build this balance. In making the distinction, Kevin said, “I think a mentor has to be strong enough and you have to have a strong enough relationship where you can validate your weaknesses and critique a little bit.” To accomplish this, the mentor and the mentee must have a relationship built on trust. They should be able to share with one another the positive and the negative aspects of the job. As Kevin eventually put it, “The ability to be honest helps to build that relationship.” Trust, confidentiality, and honesty are three components of successful mentoring that are important but not always easily achieved. Kevin noted that as a mentor provides feedback it can be perceived as judgmental, which could impact trust and subsequently how honest one is willing to be.

Kevin’s concept of trust in a mentor is much more intimate than Austin’s and Erik’s. He sees an almost familial role. This perhaps comes as a result of his familiarity and experience in the District prior to becoming the principal. In describing having trust with a mentor and being open to sharing challenges, Kevin equated it to “that big brother, that big sister type relationship.” He related that to the relationship he had with the former principal who he said
mentored him on the job whilst he was the assistant principal. Perhaps the most poignant part of Kevin’s thoughts on the person who provides mentoring was illuminated when he said, “He gave me confidence, which I needed as a new principal.” This could not be achieved absent the trust each of the participants described.

In terms of his thinking of what a mentor does and does not do to build trust, Erik shared some insights from his experience in the prescribed mentoring program in his District. He was very clear that he tends to be a skeptical person and does not initially trust. In his own words, he said, “I take everything anybody says with a grain of salt and then form my own opinions.” Once he had established trust with his mentor, Erik was able to appreciate and value the benefit of the relationship. Like the other two participants in this study, Erik articulated the importance of the mentor helping him to avoid potential difficulties. This requires trust. According to Erik, “He’d give me the head’s up on some of the roadblocks I might be facing.” But for Erik, the relationship went deeper. He saw his mentor as a “confidential sounding board.” He counted on his mentor to share his experiences as an example of what to do but not as a directive as to what Erik had to do.

It is important to be able to trust a mentor and the mentoring process, especially when things are not going well. All three participants reflected on a time since becoming a principal in a small school that was difficult. They each ruminated on how the mentoring process, more specifically their mentors as individuals helped or hindered the situation.

Erik provided the most profound example of an extremely difficult situation. For Erik, on day one of being a principal, he was confronted by an angry parent. Erik had been made aware this individual had a pending psychiatric evaluation. The parent had been issued a no trespass
order; however, he was demanding to gain access to the building in order to see his son. The challenging parent tried to argue the semantics of what pending meant with Erik. In describing that situation, Erik noted how having his assigned mentor there was helpful. Knowing that his mentor was a seasoned principal with the background and experience to negotiate difficult and potentially even volatile situations, Erik trusted that they would be able to resolve the situation with him. Having the mentor there in the building was an added benefit in this situation. Erik was able to have the parent wait while he contacted his mentor for advice and support.

**Reaching out and finding them on my own**

Each of the participants shared how they used personal connections they had established through working in education for support as they assumed the role of a new principal. Some were practicing principals in other schools whereas others were retired principals or administrators they knew from working under them as teachers or assistant principals.

All three participants in this study identified these personal relationships as helpful to them as they assumed the principalship. Each reflected on a person or multiple individuals with whom they engaged in an unstructured mentor/mentee relationship, although it had not been formally designated as such. Kevin noted the relationship he had with his principal when he was an assistant principal as providing a foundation for mentoring before and after becoming the building principal himself. As Kevin reflected on the informal experiences he had with the principal for five years when he was assistant principal, he said “when he [the principal before him] decided to retire, I was ready to step in. It wasn’t a formal mentoring program, but I got the skills and the training through that experience.” Although he did not participate in a prescribed mentoring program, Kevin’s experience with informal mentoring was similar to that of the researcher. He worked as an assistant principal for five years under a principal who informally
served as his mentor, providing him insight into and experiences with leadership he would not
normally have had outside this arrangement. As a result, he was well prepared to become the
school principal. According to Kevin “once I became the principal there was really no official
mentoring program.” He went on to say “my mentoring occurred while I was the assistant
principal for five years, uh, working under the principal.” But, he was able to see the value in
that informal experience. He would go on to maintain a relationship with that individual, who he
believes continues to mentor him.

Kevin’s informal mentoring was a positive experience. He received the support and
guidance from the principal, who provided him opportunities in leadership as an assistant
principal that are often only experienced once in the principal’s position. In reflecting, Kevin
noted “so when I did become principal, even though he was gone, and the school department did
not give me a mentoring program to go through, I was good to go.” He believes that has aided
him in his first two years as the principal, but he acknowledged that “the role is very different.”
All three participants mentioned how different it was being an assistant or an associate principal
compared with the role of being the building principal.

Kevin noted his relationships changed when he moved from the assistant principal’s job
into the principalship. Although Kevin is a graduate of the school where he is now principal and
has worked in the system in various capacities for nearly a decade, his experience since becoming
the high school leader has been different. Specifically, he said “it was interesting to see starting
in a place where somebody was mentoring you along and then starting in a different place where
you are it. You’re the high school principal.” This reality was shared among the three
participants. Each noted the dramatic change in relationships that occurs when one
assumes the principal’s position. This underscores the need for mentoring relationships, which
are dynamic. Although the relationship might change, the need for it does not go away. Likewise, as relationships with colleagues change when transitioning from one role to the principalship, the need for support during this transition is critical.

Like Kevin, Austin did not participate in an assigned mentoring program. His thoughts on mentoring stem from his experiences in education through different roles over the years. In thinking about mentoring coming into the principalship, Austin said, “I think being an assistant principal and an associate principal, I was lucky. I had done 90% of the principal’s position.” As a result, Austin was very practical in his thinking about what a mentor does. “A mentor helps me avoid the landmines.” He went on to describe those landmines as things like “the legal things, the contractual things.” He saw that aspect of mentoring as “the nuts and bolts kind of thing.”

Austin did believe a more formal or prescribed mentoring program would be necessary to achieve the support a new leader might need in those areas, regardless of his experience before the principalship.

Austin shared some of those casual networking experiences in helping him as he transitioned to becoming a building leader. “Becoming principal it was the same thing, no formal mentoring, but reaching out and finding them on my own.” Austin continued by ruminating on the informal support he has received as a member of the state principals’ association. “I think one of the best things has been the MSSAA…getting involved with other principals.” He cited several examples of how reaching out causally for advice or information had mentored him informally.

The Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators Association (MSSAA) is the Commonwealth’s affiliate of the National Secondary School Administrators Association (NASSP). The MSSAA serves as a resource to principals across Massachusetts. In addition to
myriad professional development opportunities throughout the school year, the Association holds an annual summer conference where principals get together for three days of intense, often peer-directed, professional development. The Association also provides an email list serve where principals can post questions to their colleagues across the Commonwealth on a variety of issues and concerns facing individuals and their schools. In many ways, this service provides an informal e-mentoring opportunity as individual principals seek advice and support from colleagues who may have the experience to provide valuable insight and direction. Each participant noted a familiarity with the Association and the list serve, but it was Austin who specifically shared his active use of it for support.

A more formalized relationship

Only one participant, Erik, participated in an assigned and prescribed mentoring relationship when he became a principal. He was given a mentor by his District and participated in a prescribed program that the District had developed. This required him to participate in regular meetings with his assigned mentor. The other participants’ schools did not provide for such a program. Erik, while initially skeptical of this arrangement, came to reflect positively on this arrangement provided by his District. Erik quickly pointed out that his mentor was the same person who had mentored his predecessor who only stayed one year. Although required by his district, Erik recalls that it did not end up being a very formal program. “I can honestly say my mentorship wasn’t a very structured one.” In clarifying, Erik noted, “It wasn’t, you know, this is what you need to show me next time I come in. It wasn’t like that, which I don’t think it should be.” His perceptions of the mentoring relationship were more of someone with whom to have “a confidential conversation” and as someone who was “a counselor in a way to kind of vent to and talk about things I was getting agitated with or frustrated with and kind of process.” As he did
not have a choice in this assigned arrangement, Erik harkened back to how important establishing trust was in being able to participate comfortably with his assigned mentor.

For Erik, his mentor was in-district and physically located in his building. His mentor was provided by the district and was located only a door away from Erik’s office. In our initial interview, Erik made a point to physically show me where his mentor’s office was located. He was initially uncertain of the arranged mentor relationship because the same person had served as the mentor to Erik’s predecessor. That person only stayed one year. Also, he had been named to the position when Erik was himself a candidate. Despite this, Erik felt having an assigned mentor was beneficial, which is interesting because of the situation. Reflecting on that, Erik noted:

I didn’t really have the issues that I think the other guy had because I don’t think he was ever truly invested so it was easier for me to listen to the mentor and take his advice. I think it provided me a little more insight into different things.

The structure of the mentoring program in Erik’s district provided for required regular meetings. “I met with him once a month for the nine month school year.” His mentor helped him to negotiate the cultural aspects of the job based on traditions in the school. As Erik put it, his mentor assisted him in understanding “That’s just how we do it here.” Socialization was an important characteristic of his mentoring experience. Erik shared how his mentor helped him to learn more about the school and the community.

Erik’s mentor had a good reputation as a strong leader, which was important to Erik. “My mentor had a good name. And, when I mentioned him to other people, they knew who he was. And, that made me want to learn from him even more.” He mentioned this aspect of his
mentor many times through the three interviews. He put significant importance on his mentor’s reputation.

Austin believed that prescribed mentoring relationships have value and provide more structure than the informally developed personal mentor connections. According to Austin “I think of mentoring as a more formalized relationship where a person comes to visit one month, once every two weeks, whatever, [where it is] more of a topical or guided discussion. While Austin did not participate in a prescribed mentoring program, his experiences and background gave him a solid understanding of and feelings about what a mentor is and does. Again, Austin was the oldest participant in the study and brought the most experience. He indicated that he relied on finding his own mentors during his career. “I think the limiting piece has been the lack on mentors along the way.” Austin’s conceptualization of a mentor however is very formal. He sees a structured role in mentoring.

While he did not have a formal mentor pairing, Austin took his personal mentor relationships with the retired superintendent and retired principal and added a more formalized structure. He would meet with them off campus for breakfast on a fairly regular basis. “I would come into school about 8:00-8:30 after meeting them for breakfast around six in the morning. It was nice to have just that general time to chat.” These meetings helped with both the logistical and emotional support garnered from mentoring.

Although not having participated in an assigned or prescribed mentoring program, Kevin echoed these feelings about a more formal structure and the value of time considered to develop the mentor/mentee relationship. “I don’t think it’s the short term relationship. I think it needed to be a longer term relationship.” Kevin’s ideas about mentoring come from his personal mentoring experiences. “I think a mentor is an experienced professional who takes an individual
under his or her wing and walks them through the field, whatever that might be.” He has very practical thoughts about what a mentor does. Most of them address the role of a mentor as a helper. “A mentor helps me with the things I might not necessarily know on my own or as a result of my lack of experience.” Though very new to being a principal himself, Kevin is working with the MSSAA to guide a teacher through licensure program to become an administrator. While Kevin’s experience with mentoring was informal, he likes the idea of a formalized structure of a mentoring program for new administrators. His insights raise a question about the type of mentor and what roles mentors might play. A new principal may need more than one mentor. One mentor might be needed to help with the structural aspects of the job and another to aide in socialization. The time needed to develop the relationship that Kevin addressed speaks to a different type of mentor, one who would be there to help with advice and counsel in various situations.

A graduate of the school where he is now principal, Kevin had many ties to the community and to the staff and could articulate numerous connections to people who could have been considered informal mentors for him but who would not have been appropriate mentors for some issues and situations. Kevin noted, “There’s definitely not a stranger in the building.” As a result, he counted on colleague principals in his region of the state for informal mentoring. Kevin also alluded to using technology as a support to him in the principal’s position. Like Austin he would use the state principals’ email list to pose questions to his colleagues about certain situations he was facing. While he articulated these informal mentoring relationships as valuable, Kevin also saw the value in having a more formalized structure. Unlike Austin, he did not attempt to make a more formal or prescribed mentoring relationship with any of his informal mentors.
Someone who knows the job

A consistent theme among all three participants with regard to mentoring was the value they placed in having someone to assist them whose professional knowledge would support them to grow in their role. Specifically, Kevin stated, “As for a mentor, I would want that person to be someone who knows the job and can help a new principal to understand it.” The managerial aspects of the principalship come simultaneously with the mentee’s socialization into a new school setting or a new role within the school as was the case with Kevin and Erik. The day-to-day operations and decisions required of a new principal often necessitate the support of someone who has the experience in dealing with the myriad situations that present themselves. As Kevin put it, “I needed someone to talk to me about what to look for…Someone to help me with the master schedule; help me with the budget process; help me with the evaluation system; help me deal with difficult teachers and students and parents.” Like the other participants, Kevin also saw a very practical role for the mentor. He talked about how a mentor would work to ensure the success of the mentee. Using experience as a foundation, Kevin related mentoring to sharing “best practices” and “to increasing that bag of tricks that we all need to have in order to be successful.” He, along with the other participants, believed the accumulation of experience results in an increase of professional knowledge.

Austin echoed the need for a mentor to have the professional capacity to guide him appropriately. Like Kevin and Erik, he believed this came from experience. Austin felt a mentor should be “someone who is experienced, somebody who is trained to see, someone who is trained to see the big picture and the small interactions.” The literature is rife with definitions of what a mentor is and what a mentor does. Many, if not most, of these make some reference to a mentor and his experience, which builds professional knowledge.
For Erik the support in gaining professional knowledge through an assigned and prescribed mentoring relationship was also very important. In his participation through the required mentoring program in his district, Erik noted, “His experience definitely impacted my experience.” Erik made an important distinction in the mentoring relationship when it came to the mentor using his or her experience. “He should be guiding me not judging me.” Often times this guidance comes in the form of institutional knowledge as well. Knowing how to negotiate the logistical aspects of the principalship is critical but also sharing insights into the people and critical stakeholders is also important. Socialization is a key component of mentoring.

As has been noted for two of the participants, Austin’s small district did not provide a prescribed mentoring program for him when he started as the high school principal. He had to rely on his diverse experiences leading to the principalship and the connections he had made along the way. Currently in his third year as the principal, Austin’s rich background and experiences in education give him a broader perspective on mentoring, having seen and experienced it in different roles over the years. Interestingly, Austin’s casual observations of people in the position not doing the job well served as the impetus for his decision to move into the role. Austin said:

When I was a curriculum leader, I honestly never thought I’d be a principal, but I always had leadership roles in everything. When I was a curriculum leader, we went through a couple principals that were not the most effective principals I’d ever worked for. I think that’s what pushed me into a building leadership position. I thought about it and said Okay, I can do this and this and if I do this, it will be better and it will be these things and not those things.
Despite his experiences and solid professional knowledge when he did become a principal, Austin relied on two personal connections as his mentors. He noted that both had a significant amount of experience, which he felt increased their potential to provide him support for growing in the role. He shared these were “a retired principal and a retired superintendent.” He sought their informal support of him in the position. Austin was very pragmatic in his approach to mentoring. He acknowledged that he would need support so he was proactive in reaching out for it. He said he would call or email these individuals in addition to meeting with them for advice and support. Specifically Austin said, “I’d say, okay, this is what I am dealing with. What would you do here, what would you do there and what are the pitfalls we’re going to need to avoid.” He counted on their experience to provide the professional knowledge necessary to guide him appropriately. Erik and Kevin also ruminated on the need to have someone to bounce ideas off of that had the professional knowledge necessary to support their learning and growth. They were not always just looking for the answer. Often, they needed to have someone with whom to talk through a current issue or situation.

Austin did not see a mentor as someone who does things for the new principal just because he or she might have the professional knowledge of having dealt with a similar situation. He did not believe that would help him to grow in the role. While actively engaged, he did not feel a mentor should “insert himself into situations.” Austin’s view was a mentor could provide support and direction, but ultimately the principal would need to decide what advice to accept and how to move forward on his own. Austin sees a mentor not as someone who gives answers but helps the new principal to arrive at the answer on their own. “I think a mentor is someone who can help me solve my own problems.” The mentor’s experience was a key factor in being able to do this. This view was also shared by Erik and Kevin.
Diversity

Each of the participants in this study was very unique. Beyond the convergence of the themes was the divergence of the background and experiences they brought to the study. The diversity of the participants is something I would like to address in concluding this chapter.

As has been noted, all three principals in this study were Caucasian males. One thing in this study was the homogeneity of the participants in terms of race and gender; however, woven within their apparent sameness were their very diverse histories, which led them to the principalship. One female participant had originally expressed interest in participating in the study; however, she terminated her participation after receiving the IRB consent form. She did not share why she was no longer interested. She stopped communicating with me and was eventually dropped from the study. The literature on mentoring has many references to how gender affects mentoring dyads (Allen, Day & Mark, 2005); it would have expanded the study to have had a female voice. Additionally, there is a good deal of research that differentiates the needs and expectations men and women have for mentoring. This was a clear limitation of my study. How men and women perceive mentors and approach mentoring relationships is an area that could be extended through a more diverse participant pool from this study.

Age diversity was another area where I saw outliers in the study. Kevin was the youngest in the study, but he had the most formal education. As a result, his ruminations on mentoring took a more theoretical or philosophical approach. He believed that a good mentor was one who would take him under his wing and show him how to do the job well. As was noted among the themes Erik’s military background clearly colored his perceptions of mentoring.
Austin was the oldest in the study and had the greatest number of experiences with being mentored. As a result, Austin had an almost familial role for mentorship. He referred to mentors as almost “big brothers.” He had reached out and developed mentoring relationships to support him in the principalship in a more meaningful way compared with Erik and Kevin. Austin had a better sense of what mentoring could accomplish. In his own words, he had expressed that prior to becoming a principal he felt he had already done 90% of the job. For him it was having the socialization support that brought the most meaning in terms of mentorship once he became the principal. He maintained the informal mentoring relationships he had developed with the retired principal and superintendent. He built time in to meet with them to maintain the professional and personal support he had come to enjoy through their mentorship. From his thoughts and reflections about mentoring, this would not have been something Erik would have done. It is perhaps better that Erik’s mentoring arrangement was prescribed and required by his District.

The three male participants brought unique and interesting backgrounds to the study. Beginning his career in the military, Erik approached mentorship in a very product oriented manner. Erik’s military background is something I do not think can be understated when looking at the diversity of the participants and some of the thematic outliers. He went into his assigned mentoring relationship with an almost military lens of hierarchy in seeing a mentor as being above him, a superior. As noted, the reputation of his assigned mentoring proved to be more important to Erik than the qualities he brought to the mentoring arrangement required by his small school. Kevin and Austin were more process oriented. As a result, their thoughts on mentorship had more convergence on the established themes, although not without subtle differences based on their education and experiences prior to becoming principals of small schools.
Summary

Chapter Four provided the findings of an IPA study through the data analysis of three interviews with new principals, who are in their first three years of leadership, of small high schools, defined as having a student population of fewer than 500 students, regarding their lived experiences and perceptions about mentoring. As a result, five superordinate and two sub-themes emerged. While each participant brought unique perspectives and experiences to the study based on their individual paths to the principalship, there were similarities among them as a whole, which also emerged. The results and findings of the study have enabled me to have a deeper understanding of lived experiences of the new principals in small schools with mentoring. The results underscore that mentoring shapes the experiences and satisfaction on new administrators in small schools.

The themes from the analysis are further explored in Chapter 5. The further discussion of the themes will include how they augment and support the current canon of literature on mentoring as well as how the findings from this study contribute to it. The chapter will include the significance of the findings as well as implications the current study has for new administrators in small schools.
Chapter 5 – Discussion of the Research Findings

This qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) sought to better understand the lived experiences and perceptions of new principals in small high schools with the phenomena of mentoring. I employed a single central research question to guide this study: “How does mentoring impact the experiences and satisfaction of small school administrators?”

The study generated five superordinate and two sub-themes: (1) constructing the terms of the relationship (1.1 guides you in a positive direction, 1.2 experienced, practicing professional); (2) the ability to be honest builds that relationship; (3) reaching out and finding them on my own; (4) a more formalized relationship; and (5) someone who knows the job. The following section includes a discussion of the superordinate themes, specifically how they contribute and support what is known about mentoring in the literature. With regard to the theoretical framework, I review the central research question in light of Attribution Theory. In the next section I included the significance and limitations of the findings from this study. Finally, I conclude the chapter by considering the implications of the study and providing an overall summary.

Constructing the terms of the relationship

Consistent with the literature on mentoring, agreeing to a singular definition was a challenge for each participant as they articulated the process of mentoring differently from the person who provides mentorship. All three agreed that mentoring is important and they have experienced it in various forms. As new building leaders they agreed that mentoring was an essential component for their success and satisfaction in the role. This finding confirms the majority of the findings in the literature on mentoring, both in education and across many other disciplines, where scholars cannot agree to a singular definition. While it can be discussed and
some general attributes of mentoring and mentors can be shared, agreeing to one normative
definition is almost impossible. The three participants in this study were well-educated and
experienced professionals in the field of education. Each had, at some point in his career,
experienced mentoring both in an assigned and prescribed formal arrangement, such as when
they were beginning teachers, and informally through personal connections for support, as was
most often the case. One had even served as a mentor; however, they were all three unable to
agree on how best to define it. This conundrum is shared by many scholars, including Pete Hall
(2008) who in an article titled *Building Bridges: Strengthening the Principal Induction Process*
*Through Intentional Mentoring* questioned, “What is a mentor, exactly? Though we may each
have a mental image of such a figure, the term *mentor* carries so many definitions that trying to
bring it to life is haphazard at best” (p. 450). Daresh (2004) also agrees that a single definition of
mentoring does not exist.

The challenge to finding a definition for mentoring may contribute to the difficulty in
implementing successful mentoring programs for new administrators. In the absence of being
able to articulate what mentoring is and what a mentor does, systems are left to choose randomly
from the many ideas and concepts surrounding the term. In doing so, programs might be
established which poorly match the needs of the school and the new administrator. Or as so
much of what we know points to, no program is established at all for new principals in small
schools.

The difficulty in defining mentoring provides an opportunity for new administrators in
small schools. As part of their search process and before accepting a position, they should
disclose to potential employers their ideas about mentoring and their definition of a mentor. As
Hall (2008) noted, “When the key stakeholders can agree upon the terms and their meanings, the
likelihood of an effective partnership increases” (p. 450). In the absence of a prescribed mentoring program in the district, potential new administrators might be informally paired with someone who they have articulated would serve them well as a mentor. Sharing their ideas about mentoring will likely increase a successful match with a mentor. And, disclosing their definitions of a mentor provides the opportunity for establishing the need for a mentor before they assume the role of administrator in a small school.

**The ability to be honest builds that relationship**

Beyond the diversity of opinion on definitions for mentoring, being able to navigate the uncertainty of confiding challenges to a more senior colleague whom they felt they could trust was a significant superordinate theme to emerge from the interviews and was a critical piece integral to the experiences of each participant. Trust was woven throughout the other themes as a component of the mentoring relationship. Regardless of whether the participants were discussing a mentoring relationship that was considered to be formal or informal, trust was viewed as more important than a mentor’s professional knowledge. Absent of trust, each participant agreed a potential mentor’s professional knowledge would likely not be tapped or capitalized.

Each participant mentioned trust repeatedly as a factor of importance when they were describing their lived experiences with mentoring. Whether it was formal or informal mentoring relationships, each participant described how trust of a mentor influenced their experiences. As a result, future studies might want to consider how trust is established between mentors and protégés in formal mentoring pair arrangements. Using Mayer, Davis and Schoorman’s (1995) theory of trust, future researchers might explore how new principals go about forming trust in mentoring dyads as this theory provides for how trust is formed and the antecedents of
establishing trust in relationships. This theory applies well to mentoring relationships as it focuses on the behaviors and characteristics of the person who would be the recipient of trust. This is similar to what this study discovered in the person of the mentor. While previous studies have explored how trust is developed between mentors and protégés (Boquillon, Sosik & Lee, 2005; Kram, 1985), the particular sample of new principals, those having served three years or fewer, in small schools, defined as having a student population of fewer than 500 students, had not been specifically addressed in the literature.

The experiences of the participants in this study support the findings of similar prior research. Each participant articulated how critical a component trust was in establishing, developing, and maintaining a mentoring relationship. They shared this both from the perspective of being mentored as well as ruminating on perhaps one day becoming a mentor. Many studies (Burke, 1984; Kram, 1985; Bouquillon, Sosik & Lee 2005; Jacobi, 1991) have examined the role of trust as a factor in mentoring relationships. Bouquillon et al (2005) discovered in order to improve the efficacy and value of mentoring, mentees needed to trust their mentors. Similarly, Burke (1984) notes trust as one of the most important factors in mentoring relationships and trustworthiness as an essential characteristic of a successful mentor. This study contributed to this finding, specifically for new principals in small schools.

Kram’s seminal work in 1983 on the stages of the mentoring relationship was followed by additional studies, which included examining trust as a factor in a mentoring relationship. Kram (1985) quotes a participant’s feelings about the importance of trust in the mentoring relationship as “I trust him completely; I would have no fear of telling him anything” (p. 35). A particularly poignant example of trust in mentoring for new principals came from Parkay and Gene (1992) who provided anecdotal comments from principals, which support assertions made
by principals in this study. One participant in their study states, “Therefore, I have come to believe that every beginning principal should have someone he or she can trust, someone with whom to share those frustrations and anxieties and fears” (p. 161). The findings from this study support the necessity of trust in maximizing the benefits associated with mentoring. While leveraging personal connections for professional support and assigned and prescribed professional support are listed as separate themes, each participant indicated that regardless of the format for the mentoring relationship – assigned or casual – trust was an essential element.

**Reaching out and finding them on my own**

As a theme, leveraging personal connections for professional support was readily discussed by all participants. Each was able to identify and reflect on someone with whom they had a casual mentoring relationship.

Informal mentoring can sometimes be referred to as peer mentoring (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Kevin believed his relationship with his principal when he was serving as the assistant principal was a peer mentoring model. He saw it as “succession planning.” In this collaborative arrangement, the two individuals agree to support one another professionally and sometimes emotionally on an “as needed” basis (Ehrich, 2008). Austin noted he had this informal arrangement with his former principal and the retired superintendent. These relationships were critically important to Austin during a suicide tragedy in his first year. Erik and Kevin also benefited from these informal relationships as both were able to articulate how during different times during their first years having these people with whom to confer was important to them.

Two of the three principals in this study participated in informal mentoring relationships. While the third participant was required to participate in his district’s prescribed mentoring program, he, too, disclosed using trusted colleagues as informal mentors as he transitioned into
the role. The literature is rife with examples of the influence of informal mentoring in education and across disciplines (Scandura & Williams, 2001; Ehrich, 2008; Duncan & Stock, 2010). Ehrich (2008) notes the value in this shared decision to collaborate compared to a third party pairing in establishing a mentoring relationship. Selecting with whom to mentor has benefits and potential liabilities in mentoring. A personal selection comes with an almost built in element of being able to confide challenges to a more senior colleague, the most salient theme to emerge from this study. On the other hand, if the selection of a mentor has too personal a connection the value of the relationship might be compromised if he is not willing to provide critical or constructive feedback, which would help the new principal to improve his job performance. Of the two participants who relied solely on informal mentoring relationships, both report the arrangement as contributing to their satisfaction in the role. In large part, this was a result of selecting a mentor about whom they knew had the professional knowledge needed to help them grow. In being able to select one’s own mentor, the new principal consciously sought out someone he trusted and whom he knew has the requisite skills and knowledge to help him achieve.

**A more formalized relationship**

Assigned and prescribed professional support and leveraging personal connections for professional support were articulated with regard to the participant’s experiences with mentoring. Although only one participant had participated in a prescribed mentoring program, all three agreed on the benefit of participating in a program where there was a more structured and prescribed mentoring arrangement. Each believed it should be provided for new principals in small schools as they transition into the role. While they like the ability to use personal connections for support, they felt having someone in district who would be available more
regularly and officially might help new principals in areas they might not even realize they need it. Kevin and Austin, who did not have an assigned mentoring arrangement in their schools, spoke of the need to have something more formal for emerging principals in small schools. While they saw their personal connections as invaluable, there were instances where they felt having an identified mentor in the district would have been more helpful and more expedient. Like Erik’s story of the first day on the job with the angry parent, Austin and Kevin spoke of how having an assigned mentor who was present in the District would be helpful to all new principals who were confronted with situations which required immediate support, advice or direction. Additionally, they believed having a prescribed structure with specific guidelines and expectations would have facilitated greater learning as they transitioned through initial socialization and difficult situations in the position.

A fundamental consideration at the start of this study, in some ways, was to make formal mentoring relationships a requirement for all new principals in small schools. While only one participant reported on an assigned and prescribed mentoring arrangement provided by his district, the other two principals in the study spoke to how having a more formalized arrangement may have been beneficial in some aspects on their experience. Although the influence of their informal mentors was significant and positive, all three reflected on how a required arrangement may have had some merit. They noted that sometimes they did not even realize they needed support. A more formalized structure would allow for principals to process regularly with someone about the challenges and expectations of the position.

A more formalized arrangement establishes parameters that ensure new administrators are receiving the support and guidance necessary to make their transition to and experience in the initial years of the principalship a positive and satisfying experience. This reflection is supported
in the literature on formal mentoring as Eby & Lockwood (2005) state, "Mentoring consists of school visits, observations, one-on-one conferences, and peer support group meetings that provide an opportunity for 'team mentoring'" (p. 1). Each participant noted that within the informal mentoring structure, these parameters may be missed or absent altogether. A formalized mentoring arrangement helps to provide new administrators with the consistency necessary to address formally the issues that necessitate support and guidance. Jacobi (1991) notes formal mentoring programs often delineate the frequency and location of meetings as well as provide for training of mentors who assume this formalized role. This helps to ensure that the protégé receives structured support versus having the new administrator rely on making these connections for assistance on his own.

While only one participant’s school provided for an assigned and prescribed mentoring program in his first year, all three principals referenced the desire to have a more formal mentoring experience as they transitioned into the principalship at their small schools. When asked how they would develop a mentoring program for new administrators, each indicated they would require a formal mentoring program. Recognizing the lack of personnel, Erik and Austin both mentioned achieving a more formal mentoring program through what they described as a cohort model. Kevin extended this thinking by suggesting a role for technology in mentoring relationships. Erik saw the value in groups of new administrators getting together with seasoned veterans, the mentors, for very structured monthly meetings. Erik seemed to want to balance the formal and informal and suggested the cohorts meet at required times - he suggested quarterly - but in perhaps slightly less formal settings like a local restaurant or someone’s house. Erik, Austin and Kevin each noted that formal mentoring programs would be initiated by the school rather than by the individuals. As a result, they would necessarily be much more structured. They
each discussed how these formal mentoring programs should require training for mentors before they are permitted to act as mentors. This supports the assertion made by Hall (2008) that in order for mentoring programs to be effective they need to be implemented by high-quality trained mentors.

Typically, formal mentoring programs have specific objectives for the program such as reducing turnover and developing and improving specific skills and abilities in the new employee (Lockwood, 2005; Ehrich, 2008). Kevin, Austin and Erik each had different objectives for a formal mentoring program. Perhaps from his participating in a formal mentoring arrangement, Erik’s objectives were much more logistical. He wanted someone who could help him with the management aspects of the job - scheduling, budgeting and personnel evaluations. In the middle was Kevin. He shared the desire to have a mentor who would help him with administrative roles and responsibilities, but he also wanted someone with whom he would have a personal connection. Austin’s concept was more around group learning. He mentioned the cohorts being assigned readings to do in advance and then when they got together at prescribed times and locations, they could share together around a guided discussion topic. Daresh (2004) wrote that formal mentoring relationships contribute to shared leadership development through an understanding of the complexity of the profession.

As noted in the literature review in Chapter Two, formal mentoring programs often dictate the number and frequency of mentor and protégé meetings and often emphasize the process of mentoring over the people participating in the relationship. To that end, prescribed mentoring programs can sometimes run the risk of poor matches. As a result, participants might feel less satisfied with the mentoring program or worse might resent the experience. Austin believed that even in a formal mentoring program, a new principal should be able to weigh in
with what he was looking for from the mentor. This included the professional as well as the personal characteristics. Even though Erik did not get to select his mentor, he felt that the mentor’s reputation was important in the relationship. More than personal attributes, Erik believed that how well-known a person is in the profession was more important than personal relationships in connecting mentors and protégés. Austin agreed more with Erik with regard to professional acumen being important in establishing formal mentoring pairs. Over personal characteristics, Austin believed that a mentor should have the skills and experiences to help a protégé see the options rather than dictating the answers. Austin and Kevin agreed that not having a formal mentoring program could be seen to lessen the satisfaction in the role of principal of a small school. Erik specifically noted having a formal mentoring program as enhancing his satisfaction. He articulated several examples where not having had a mentor would have made the first year much more difficult for him.

**Someone who knows the job**

Support for growing in the role was a theme that emerged from each participant’s interview. The benefit of having someone whose experience and professional background could guide them as they transitioned into the principalship of a small school was shared by all three. Interestingly, professional knowledge spanned domains from socialization – helping the new principal to negotiate the culture of his new school – to practical and pragmatic areas where the new principals needed guidance in doing logistical work like scheduling and budgeting.

The various roles expected to be assumed by today’s educational leaders are diverse and challenging. From instructional leader to manager of the custodians, principals are confronted with wide-ranging demands from diverse constituencies. All three participants in this study referenced the different expectations they confronted as the new leader in a small school. A
frequently cited need from each participant was having someone with the professional
background, knowledge and experiences to help guide them in negotiating these. According to
proficiencies requires knowledge, skills and dispositions” (p. 139). Despite their background and
experiences prior to the principalship, a new administrator must negotiate professional and
socialization issues, made more difficult in a new setting. The three participants in this study
confirmed this assertion. One participant in this study brought a wealth of prior experience to his
first principal’s position and was a known person in the system; however, as he noted, things
changed when his title changed. Unfortunately, without mentors, new principals in small
districts do not have the support for learning and acquiring these proficiencies and navigating the
role change among their colleagues. As Hall (2008) noted, “Most new principals are thrown into
the job to sink or swim. We must do a better job if our schools are going to improve and a well-
designed mentoring program is one of the best ways to ensure success” (p. 449). All three
participants in this study brought this to bear. Regardless of their expertise and experience and
beyond the relationships they believed to have had prior to assuming the principalship, these new
principals demonstrated through their lived experiences that having someone with the professional
knowledge as someone who has lived the principals’ role is necessary.

Attribution Theory

For purposes of this study, I was interested in understanding how mentoring impacted the
attributions new principals might make with regard to their experiences within the first years of
assuming the job and subsequently how they might attribute those to their satisfaction in the role.
I used Attribution Theory as the theoretical framework for this study. In using Attribution
Theory to guide the analysis, I originally anticipated the results of the study might mirror much
of the literature of academic attribution done previously. More specifically, an individual is likely to attribute his or her success based on internal factors such as intellect, ability or skill whereas he is probably more inclined to make external attributions based on the difficulty of the task or his lack of achievement. In the context of mentoring for new administrators in small schools, I anticipated that their satisfaction and reflections on successes in the position might be attributed to internal factors whereas dissatisfaction and areas of difficulty might have external attributions.

Weiner (2000) proposed the basic premise of Attribution Theory is an individual’s attempt to search for causes as to why an event happened. While Weiner (2000) was using Attribution Theory to describe the academic achievement of students, the attributions for success were similar among the three principals in this study. Each identified personal factors of effort and ability as causes for their achievement as a building leader. A mentor for each of the three seemed to play a role in their achievements and satisfaction. Interestingly, a mentor was identified as a salient factor in instances where the new principals experienced both success and in those where they had difficulty.

All three participants reflected on difficult issues, which they confronted during their first year as the leader of a small school. Each of them articulated that having an assigned and prescribed mentoring relationship would have impacted how they handled the situation; however, each of them referred to reaching out to trusted colleagues for support via personal connections for mentoring relationships. Erik, who participated in an assigned mentoring program in his District, attributed having a formal mentor as a perceived help. He did not see him as a detriment or as any sort of an impediment in difficult situations. Similarly, all three
participants were able to reflect on positive experiences during their first year in the principalship. Likewise, they made a positive attribution to a mentor on these experiences.

All three participants were asked to reflect on a situation that was positive for them as they began the principalship. Erik, Austin and Kevin were each able to share something that had gone well. Erik mentioned how his mentor pushed him to be more involved in the community where he had become principal. This was an interesting attribution as he credited his mentor for helping him to experience this positive situation. From his explanation, this might not have been something that he would have done on his own.

Kevin shared that his one of his positive experiences was also made possible, in part, because of a personally established mentoring connection. Kevin had been hired to be the interim principal. He was leading an initiative to become an innovation school. The innovation school model was the idea of the superintendent; however, he charged Kevin with the implementation. It involved getting the faculty to buy into the idea. Kevin, with the support and mentoring of the superintendent, formed faculty work groups to help design the innovation school model. At the end of the year, it was a unanimous vote of the full faculty to move forward with the model they had developed. Kevin credited the support of the superintendent for making this positive experience possible. He specifically attributed his mentoring him as contributing to his positive feelings of satisfaction.

**Intellectual Goals and Implications for Future Research**

From this study, I hope to give this unique population of administrators in small schools a voice. The perspectives provided by the participants give insights and ideas from their experiences.
I set two intellectual goals for this research. One intellectual goal was to better understand the experiences of new leaders who move into the principalship in a small school and to shed light on this unique population that is largely underrepresented in the literature. The findings from this study are significant because they are among the few studies that specifically look at mentoring through the lens of leaders in small secondary schools. I believe this study to be among the first which specifically identifies schools with a population of fewer than five hundred students and with new leaders, defined as having fewer than three years experiences.

Another goal was to glean salient information that would improve the transition to, experiences in and satisfaction with the role of a new principal in a small school. Through this information, universities and principal preparation programs might be conscious of the unique perspectives and roles that principals take on when assuming the principalship in a small school. Additionally, districts could consider induction and mentoring programs that support the needs of principals in this setting as articulated from this study.

Significance

The results of this research study provide scholar practitioners with an increased level of insight into how new principals in small schools perceive the impact of mentoring on their work. Prior mentoring research has yielded scant evidence for this particular population. The data from this study lend support to the underpinnings of an emerging Theory of Mentoring and to Attribution Theory. The themes provide a foundation for future studies with respect to building level administrators at the secondary level in small schools. Additionally, the findings from this study could impact principal preparation programs at the college and/or university level as they consider the unique perspectives illuminated from this study.
After an extensive literature review, it is my conclusion that this study is one of very few to produce evidence of mentoring for small school principals. Although myriad studies on mentoring across disciplines have been conducted over the years, the demographic population represented by this study is unique. Further, the insights from this study can provide rural district leaders information for establishing mentoring programs that include the salient factors yielded from the analysis. The rich data obtained from the principals who participated in this study provide the lived experiences of new leaders in small districts. Finally, with this information, successful mentoring programs in smaller districts might be established to help ensure job satisfaction and longevity in the position.

**Recommendations**

Data from this study support the overall value of mentoring – both formal and informal – as outlined in the literature review for administrators. The data also illuminate a lack of current research surrounding mentoring for new principals in small schools. Analyzing the results of this study and making interpretations, I offer the following recommendations for consideration for future research in mentoring for principals in small schools:

1. Smaller districts where there is only one high school need to consider the clear need and value of implementing a mentoring and induction program for new administrators, not just for the first year, but for the first three years on the job. As evidenced through this study, ongoing, relevant and job-specific support through a trusted mentor will improve new principals’ experiences and ultimately their overall satisfaction in the role.

2. To build capacity, smaller districts might want to collaborate with neighboring districts to develop programs and to train mentors, who would be used to support new secondary
school administrators. Given the funding shortage ubiquitous to public schools in general, cohort districts would want to develop training models which support the needs expressed by participants in this study, specifically more formalized arrangements with mentors who can build trust and who have the professional knowledge to support their development.

3. Mentoring includes building trust in order to allow mentors to share freely their professional knowledge. University preparation programs for new administrators might look to include required and prescribed mentoring experiences for aspiring administrators during their practicum experiences. Additionally, state licensure requirements might include experience being in an assigned mentoring relationship for a required number of hours prior to becoming certified as an administrator. With these in place, a new principal taking the helm of a small school will have had the experience with mentoring to assist in transitioning to a similar arrangement, which would be required, in the new district.

4. As a formal and prescribed mentoring program is mostly required for new teachers, districts must recognize the importance and value of establishing a mentoring program for administrators, regardless of size of the district or current perceived capacity.

Limitations and future considerations

This study contributes to a qualitative understanding of mentoring for new principals of small schools; however, limitations in the study do exist. They are discussed in the following section. These limitations are in addition to the general limitations of qualitative research outlined in Chapter One.
The first limitation of this study is a result of a lack of diversity in the participant sample. Although the participants represent a diverse range of age and experience - one participant was turning fifty and had twenty-five years’ experience, another was under thirty and had only five years’ experience in education and the third was thirty-five with twelve years working in education – leading to the principalship, this was where diversity in the study ended. While initially one female participant who met the selection criteria expressed interest in the study, she did not end up participating. She stopped responding after she had been sent the consent to participate form. As a result, there were no female principals in the study. The study sample did not include experiences of racial minorities. All three participants were Caucasian males. Unfortunately, the lived experiences and voices of female administrators and principals of color were not shared in this study. Future studies wishing to expand this investigation will want to consider expanding the diversity of participants in order that their voices and perspectives will be heard.

A second potential limitation of the study is a lack of data specific to the focused population of principals in small schools, specifically with a student population of fewer than 500 students. While there exists an abundance of information on the general topics of mentoring, new principals, leadership and transition, there is a dearth of data and scholarly resources specific to the participant criteria of this study. Further, the geographic representation of participants only in Massachusetts potentially limited the number of participants and the scope of the analysis. Expansion of this study in the future may want to consider outreach to participants beyond the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as state specific standards for administrative licensure differ and may enhance the information a researcher is able to ascertain on the lived experiences of principals in small schools.
Finally, the theoretical framework for this study, Attribution Theory, may have been expanded to include other theoretical lenses to help illuminate the experiences of new principals. As noted in the literature review, the expectations of today’s principals are ever increasing (The Wallace Foundation, 2012). Unfortunately, there has not been an increase in the supports provided, specifically to new principals in small schools, to help negotiate change, to understand how organizations learn, and to appreciate how best adult learning can occur in organizations. Fullan’s Change Theory (2006), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977), and Learning Organizations’ Theory (Senge, 2003) may have helped to view the lived experiences through these different theoretical perspectives. Future studies may want to expand the work begun here through different and multiple theoretical frameworks.

Suggestions for future research

This study has the potential for expansion in a number of areas beyond the limitations outlined. Future studies on mentoring for new principals in small schools may consider such additional questions as:

1. What impact, if any, does mentoring have on the retention of new principals in small schools?

2. How does formal mentoring differ from informal mentoring in terms of how satisfied new principals are in small schools?

3. What role does mentor selection – mandated or choice – have on the satisfaction or retention of new principals in small schools?
4. How do new principals in small schools perceive being mentored by a teacher versus another administrator?

5. What impact does mentoring have beyond socialization factors on new principals in small schools?

6. How do small schools evaluate best practices for existing mentoring programs?

Summary

The findings from this study have helped to establish meaning for the central research question. Specifically, each participant spoke to how mentoring affected their experiences and ultimately their satisfaction in the role. Each attributed mentoring, either in an assigned and prescribed relationship or informally and more casually, as impacting their experience and satisfaction in the position. All participants were able to cite examples of positive and negative experiences since becoming a principal of a small high school where mentoring played a role. The established themes support historical research findings in the field of mentoring but also contribute to the current void in data, specifically with regard to mentoring for new principals in small high schools.

This study has focused on the lived experiences of three principals in Massachusetts who are in their first three years as the lead administrator of a small school, defined as having a student population of fewer than 500 students. Specifically, the study looked for answers as to how mentoring impacted the lived experiences of these individuals and subsequently their satisfaction in the role. Participants were able to share their lived experiences with mentoring and to extrapolate meaning from them. Adding to the cannon of literature on mentoring, the participants were also able to share from their experience how mentoring might best be defined.
Mentoring is ubiquitous across myriad disciplines, especially in the literature in education. Unlike other phenomena, it is not a fad that is likely to disappear. Daresh (2004) writes, “The job of the mentor appears to be one that will continue to play a visible role in future schemes designed to improve the quality of educational personnel in general” (p. 501).

Over its rich history, mentoring has been vetted as a practice that has significant potential to improve the experiences of many stakeholders in education. The benefits of mentoring for teachers is widely recognized, but emerging in the literature is its promise to improve the experiences of today’s educational administrators, who are being called upon to provide instructional leadership in our schools. As outlined in the literature review, a majority of states have implemented mentoring programs for new and novice administrators. Many veteran administrators are preparing to retire; they will be replaced by a cadre of administrators who are new to the position (Daresh, 2004). For good reason and as confirmed by the findings of this study, these new and novice administrators will need support to ensure success. Daresh (2004) writes, “Beginning administrators tend to have considerably more success when they are able to receive ongoing support from experienced mentors” (p. 506). Given the understanding of the benefits of mentoring and the critical importance that principals play in leading our schools, it is imperative that we do not leave our new educational leaders in small schools without this vital component for success.

To address the emerging need for more educational leaders, we must also address the reticence why people are not willing to assume the position. Daresh (2004) notes, “[I]t was discovered that one of the features of the principalship that often served as a disincentive to people considering it as a career option centered on the fact that people were avoiding the job because they did not wish to take on a job in which they would be isolated and left unsupported
by professional colleagues” (p. 509). The implications for attracting and retaining new leaders to our schools are significant. As previously cited, the need is growing but the interest is decreasing. When we add to the decreased interest the increase in expectations, we must take what we know and understand about mentoring and put it into practice. To avoid the storm, administrative mentoring programs for principals must become the norm, especially in our smaller or more rural districts. While this study provides a good foundation, further studies that correlate mentoring for administrators with retention in small school settings will be necessary.

The literature has supported that too often administrators, particularly in more rural settings, have been thrown into the job without the necessary supports in place to ensure they have the skills and training necessary to be successful. As has been noted in the problem of practice, the expectations for principals are increasing. The diversity in training and preparation programs for administrators further exacerbates a disconnect between the methodology and relevance when compared with the on the job skills necessary for new principals to have upon the completion of such a program. In the job, principals are immediately expected to be educational and instructional leaders. Hall (2008) noted “most new principals are thrown into the job to sink or swim. We must do better if our schools are going to improve, and a well-designed mentoring program is one of the best ways to ensure success” (p. 451).

A Wallace Foundation (2012) study found that leadership is only second to teaching among school-related factors influencing student learning. And, this is only one aspect of the position. Add to this the logistical and managerial components of running a building, managing personnel and being a public relations spokesman, the need for mentoring of new principals in small schools is prevalent and immediate. It is my personal and professional hope of that this
study will serve as an impetus for organizing, developing and launching such programs for new administrators in small schools.

Post-Script

For the past 10 years, I have been a principal in two different small high schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. From my experience, I have heralded the need for this population of administrators to have more support, in terms of mentoring, as they assume the principalship. In the first school, I was given the opportunity to work with a mentor who guided my growth and development purposefully along the way. With the expressed commitment to prepare me for the principalship when I was working under him as the assistant principal, he took me under his wing and made sure I had the opportunities and experiences necessary to prepare me for the next step. When he retired, I had already done more in the role than most new principals. Plus, having the established connection with him as an informal mentor, I was able to maintain the relationship and to reach out to him for advice and counsel. We had and maintain a relationship built on trust, which enables us to be professional colleagues and critical friends.

The second school I was handed the keys and directed to go for it. This proved to be a much different situation and a lack of an assigned mentor in the District was clear in how the first year played itself out. While I could readily reach out to my former principal for support through our established informal mentorship, there was so much in the new position that was particularly germane to the unique small school where I had been hired, it was difficult not to have someone in District assigned to support me. His support could be levied on product issues associated with the job – scheduling, human resource issues, and budget. He did not know the community or its idiosyncrasies, which made the process issues of mentoring much more
challenging. This experience really served as the impetus for this thesis. It underscored the importance for new administrators in small Districts to have mentoring support. Despite having done the job for four years in another District, I needed the assistance in my new position in terms of socialization support. There is a good deal in the literature about this aspect of mentorship.

As I reflect on what a mentoring program looks like for new administrators in small schools, I am drawn to my own experience as well as those lived experiences shared by the three participants. Perhaps one of the most critical pieces in establishing a more formalized mentorship experience is professional development. In order for mentoring to be successful, mentors need to be trained, particularly in adult learning theory. There are many studies on the benefits and value of ongoing professional development for mentors.

Another component that is critical for successful mentoring programs is time. Unfortunately, in schools today, even where there is a more formalized and prescribed mentoring program, time ends up ebbing away and the components of the program get lost. Mentors and protégés need time together to build rapport and trust. Weekly meetings should be scheduled to provide time for discourse and reflection. One of the participants suggested that a good use of time for mentors would be to have guided or topical discussions as part of the scheduled meetings. But, beyond the focused use of time was a consideration of time being allotted simply to process the numerous things facing new principals.

While there are many resources for mentors for new teachers, such materials seem to be in shorter supply for new administrators. One way to address this dearth of resources might be through collaborative mentoring networks. Cohorts could be developed to support new
administrators in small schools. Drago-Severson (2009) labels these as mentoring communities. As most schools have athletic leagues where athletic directors get together, these groups could be expanded to support principal development. In addition to weekly gatherings of mentors and protégés, these cohorts could provide monthly supports that might focus principals on bigger picture issues in the profession. Another option might be to use technology to support mentoring efforts for new administrators in small schools. Email, blogs and Skype could be three vehicles to implement mentoring communities for these administrators.

The problem of practice could not be more intimate for me. As I review my study, the findings and the literature, the need for mentoring for new administrators in small schools could not be more important nor the need more immediate. In a 2007 survey of 849 principals by Darling Hammond & La Pointe, mentoring was ranked as the most helpful form of professional development. According to The Education Research Service in 1999 nearly 40% of all public high school principals planned to leave the position before 2010. Combine that with an anticipated increase of 10 to 20% in available jobs in administration in the next five years and the need for principals is remarkable. The problem of practice remains. This study contributes to addressing this problem of practice. The findings support the need for mentoring for new administrators in small schools.

This thesis was a dynamic process that allowed me to explore an area of interest that was clearly beyond my everyday role as a building principal, but certainly something that was within my reach to complete. I was motivated and inspired by this experience; I look forward to the future opportunities that exist both at my current institution and beyond to extend the work of mentoring for new administrators in small schools. Currently, as a result of this study, I have been asked to work with individuals at the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators
Association to consider bringing this work to a larger scale. A principal on the retired administrators committee and on the Board of Directors with me would like to work with the Legislative Committee this year to propose developing a position paper that would promote the idea of mentoring and induction programs for all new principals across the Commonwealth. We are also discussing a state-level initiative where retired administrators would be trained as mentors and assigned to new principals under a structured mentoring program through the Association. A similar program is currently done for teachers and superintendents in Massachusetts but is not currently required for principals. In sharing my research, the state association is interested in using it as evidence for the need for such a program to be developed and implemented.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interview 1:

1. How did you get into the field of education?
2. How long have you been in the field?
3. Tell me about your background and experiences leading up to becoming a principal.
4. How did you come to enter the field of educational administration?
5. Describe a key experience you feel influenced your decision to become a principal.
   a. Are there additional turning point experiences that impacted your decision?

Interview 2:

1. How would you describe what it has been like becoming a small high school principal?
   a. What has been good?
   b. What has been difficult?
2. How would you define a mentor?
   a. What characteristics does a mentor have?
   b. What does a mentor do?
   c. What doesn’t a mentor do?
3. Can you tell me about how you have been mentored since becoming a principal?
   a. How would you describe it?
4. Can you tell me about difficult situation you have had since becoming a principal?
   a. How would you describe how mentoring impacted the situation?
5. Can you think of something that you’ve read, seen or heard about mentoring recently that makes you reflect on your experience as a new principal with mentoring?
6. Can you tell me about a positive situation you had since becoming a principal?
a. How would you describe how mentoring impacted the situation?

7. How would you describe mentoring on your satisfaction as a principal?
   a. Why do you feel that way?
   b. Can you give me an example of what you mean by that?

Interview 3:

8. Given what you have said about your experiences in education before you became a principal and given what you have said about your life as a new principal, how do you understand mentoring now?
   a. How is this different from how you originally considered mentoring?
   b. How does it impact your job satisfaction?

9. If you were to design a mentoring program to increase a new small school principal’s job satisfaction, what would it look like?
   c. What would you make sure to include?
   d. What would you make sure to avoid?

2. What else about your experience with mentoring do you think would be important to share?
Member Request:
Participants Sought for Small School Mentoring Study

Greetings--

My name is John J. Buckey. I am Principal of Nantucket High School and a student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. To complete my Doctor of Education studies, I am engaging in a study to explore mentoring with secondary school administrators in small schools. Your participation in this study will aid in improving the experience of new administrators in small districts by identifying what aspects of mentoring programs, formal or informal, most impacted administrators and their retention in the job.

If you are currently in your first three years of being a secondary school principal in a high school that has fewer than 500 students and you have participated, formally or informally, in a mentoring relationship, you are eligible for this study. Participation would include three interviews. Participation is voluntary. All information gathered through the interviews would be anonymous. Your identity would be protected, as would the identity of your school. No information that could identify you would be released as a result of your participation. Please contact me if you would like to be considered for participation.

I can be contacted at buckey.j@husky.neu.edu or by telephone at (617) 694-2233.

Regards,
John J. Buckey
Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Billye Rhodes, PI; John J. Buckey, Student Investigator

Title of Project: Mentoring for secondary school administrators in small schools: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a new, small secondary school principal, within your first three years of service in a high school with fewer than 500 students. You responded to an invitation to participate.

Why is this research study being done?

This study is being done in order to examine how mentoring affects new principals in small secondary schools. Once the principals’ experiences have been analyzed and essential themes have been identified, the finding will be compared to what is known in the literature about mentoring programs.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in three interviews, each lasting between one half an hour to forty-five minutes. The location of the interviews will be mutually agreed upon between you and the interviewer. Online interviewing will be available if necessary. During the interviews, you will be asked about your background, education and experiences leading up to becoming a principal. You will also be asked about your experiences with mentoring.
The interviews will be audio recorded. Your identity will remain anonymous, known only to the researcher. No identifying information will be included. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to participating in this study.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**
There will be no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, data collected in this study may improve our understanding of how mentoring programs affect principal in small secondary schools.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Interviews will be audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. The transcription will exclude any personally identifying information. Your participation will be coded as “participant #” in the transcription.

You will be provided a copy of the transcribed interviews. You may make any changes or corrections necessary to ensure your confidentiality if you believe a response might compromise it. After that, any and all parts of the transcribed interviews will be eligible for quotation in published reports and findings of the study.

To further ensure confidentiality, all study data will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher’s computer. Only the researcher will have access to this file.

Participants’ names or other identifying information will not be included in the thesis. Please understand, even if a participant’s name is not used in publication, the researcher will still be able to connect the participant with the information gather from him/her in the study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact John J. Buckey, the primary researcher, via telephone at (617) 694-2233 or via email at
buckey.j@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Billye Rhodes, the Principal Investigator, via telephone at (617) 390-3918 or via email at b.rhodes@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
The only anticipated costs to participate in this study would be travel to a mutually agreeable location for the interviews. The researcher will work to minimize the distance for travel. Interviews might be schedule via Skype in order to eliminate travel cost.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
You must be at least 18 years old to participate unless your parent or guardian gives written permission.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________  ______________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

______________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________  ______________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent Date

______________________________
Printed name of person above