BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ASPIRING PRINCIPALS

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by
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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how seven graduates of the inaugural cohort of the Aspiring Principals Program from the Buckeye Urban Public School District understood and made sense of their transition into the role of school reform leader. The anthropological framework of liminality was used as a theoretical lens from which to view the study. The researcher utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a way to interpret meaning from the participants’ experiences. Data was primarily collected via face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The researcher also collected data from optional written statements submitted by the participants and from researcher reflection statements and journaling. The data analysis process revealed four superordinate themes from the participants’ experiences: 

Developing belief in the system of change, perseverance through meeting difficult messaging head-on, progression towards self-actualization through self-reflection, and awareness of organizational opportunity through the use of personal reflexivity. The study revealed several implications for theory and research. The study also revealed several implications for practice that affected both policy and practice.

Keywords: aspiring principals; Aspiring Principals Program, education reform; interpretative phenomenological analysis; liminality; principalship; school leadership; school leader development; urban school reform
Dedication

I want to dedicate this thesis to all of the young people that I have had the pleasure of serving throughout my career. Every one of you have shown me that a purpose-driven educator can make all the difference in a child’s life. Because of you, I have dedicated my life to ensuring that all children have the opportunity to benefit from a high-quality education. Thank, YOU, for teaching me.
Acknowledgments

There are many people who I would like to acknowledge who supported me throughout my doctoral journey. Obtaining a doctorate is quite the arduous task. If it were not for the continuous love and support from my wife I would not have been able to make it to the end. Thank you, Shaunta, for always being there to step in when times got rough and for pushing me when my own drive began to run low. I also want to thank you for providing me with the two best gifts during this journey, our two sons Gabe and Nate.

Gabe and Nate, you two will have no recollection of my spending countless days and nights reading, writing, and editing, but know that having to make the choice between spending time with the two of you and completing my school work was the hardest ever. It is my hope, however, that this degree will serve as a testament that whatever you set your mind to, you can achieve. I hope that I have made both of you proud. By the way, raising the two of you was ten times harder than completing this degree!

Mom and Dad, I want to thank both of you for always believing in me. The values that you instilled within me at a young age have been instrumental to what I have been able to accomplish throughout life. Thank you for your unwavering love and encouragement.

Pat and Lori, I also wanted to thank the both of you for being great older sibling role models. Growing up and watching the two of you value education inspired me to always seize my educational and life opportunities to the fullest.

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was stressful, I never once felt as if I could not accomplish this goal. You did this all the way through and you broke the entire effort up in a way that was doable and achievable. I know that I am a better researcher because you did not stop pushing me.

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Dr. Elise Rogers, I also wanted to be sure to thank you as well. As I have mentioned to you in the past, you were the first person to ever suggest that I pursue a doctorate. Although it has been nearly 15 years between the time you suggested doctoral studies and now, I have never forgot about your encouragement to do more. Thank you for planting the seed.

To the seven school leaders that took part in this study, thank you for allowing me into your lives. Despite your extremely busy schedules, each of you made time to commit to my study. You are to be commended for your passion to the field and to your students, and I am encouraged by what all of you will add to the reform movement. I wish all of you nothing but the best!
Lastly, I want to thank all of my other family and friends who have supported me over the years. Your continuous inquiries into my progress and your constant words of encouragement have been invaluable to my drive to press on.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 and recently again in December 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), has created a climate of increased accountability within schools and school districts across the country. As reauthorizations to ESEA over the past 50 years have required school districts to reform their practices to meet new demands, no such reauthorization before NCLB, which is still largely in effect until the 2017-2018 school year ("The Every Student Succeeds Act: Explained," 2016) has created such a volatile landscape in which schools must operate.

The inequities within “adverse socioeconomic contexts” (p. 1473), and urban schools in particular, have been and still remain a byproduct of the educational disparities that have long plagued America (Wickrama, Simons, & Baltimore, 2012). Bettis (1996) noted that “to understand urban schools, one must first understand the urban setting, which is qualitatively different from suburban and rural settings in its concentration of capital, its governmental organization, its ideology of growth, and its social and spatial relations” (p. 106). Knoblauch and Chase (2015) noted that urban schools face greater challenges with funding, resources, staffing, and discipline, and thus have long trailed their suburban counterparts. While all school districts nationwide have engaged in some practice of reform, it has been the large urban school districts that have struggled to sustain reforms that improve student outcomes (Payne, 2008).

Knoblauch and Chase (2015) further noted that urban schools are often in high-poverty areas, which further exacerbates challenges stemming from social inequalities. The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University noted that the achievement gap for low-income children starts early and is not easily reversed ("Child poverty," 2015). Because
urban students are twice as likely to live in poverty as suburban students, correlations can be drawn between residing within an urban setting and the likelihood of living in poverty ("The condition of education," 2015). This begins to explain why, on average, urban students tend to have less academic success than their suburban counterparts ("The condition of education," 2015). In addition, urban schools are often larger, as are their class sizes, and are typically plagued by higher rates of teacher absenteeism ("Child poverty," 2015). Urban students are also more likely to be exposed to safety and health risks, which further complicate learning outcomes. The compounding nature of these effects places the urban student at a tremendous disadvantage.

NCCP’s research reveals that 22% of children in America lived in poverty and 45% lived in low-income families ("Child poverty," 2015). In Ohio, 21% of school-aged children came from families living in poverty ("The condition of education," 2015). The site of this study, the Buckeye Urban Public School District (pseudonym) (BUPSD), has one of highest rates of childhood poverty in the nation at 53% (Tooher, 2014).

**Overview of School Leadership**

Among the extensive studies and findings relative to urban school success, a common thread speaks to the fundamental role that the school building leader, or principal, plays in school improvement (Anderson & Shirley, 1995; "Aspiring Principals Program," 2015; Carlin, 1992; Dantley, 2010; Hallinger & Anast, 1992; Miller, 2013; Mullen & Patrick, 2000; Thomas & Fitzhugh-Walker, 1998; White-Smith & White, 2009). Despite comprehensive findings on urban school leaders, university-based principal training programs have been slow to produce graduates en masse who can effectively take the helm of fledgling urban schools and carry forward a successful reform agenda (Levine, 2005). Levine (2005) suggested that the majority of university-based principal training programs range in quality from inadequate to poor. The
University Council for Educational Administration has estimated that only 40%, or 200 of the roughly 500 university-based principal preparation programs across the U.S., are effective (Miller, 2015). BRIGHT, a new program authorized and funded by the Ohio General Assembly, suggests that most traditional school leadership training programs in the nation, and Ohio in particular, have failed within the last two decades ("Bright: New leaders for Ohio schools," 2015). As a result, innovative non-traditional principal training programs often proclaim that they can prepare education practitioners and other professional leaders for the rigors of reforming schools within urban America. As urban districts across the country struggle to improve, many have opened their doors to these non-traditional principals to bring about reform.

School Reform in the Buckeye Public Schools

Decades of limited growth and pending accountability measures have resulted in a groundbreaking bi-partisan reform agenda for the BUPSD community. The state legislation has brought about unprecedented opportunities to realize academic gains that have often been stymied by a non-unified and un-collaborative environment (BUPSD, 2014). This transformative reform effort intends to increase the number of high-performing schools within the city. The BUPSD noted that these reforms set out to reestablish public trust and confidence in the schools and to reverse the dramatic decline in student enrollment of the past few decades (BUPS, 2014). The reform has provided the political structures to effectively transform the district from a traditional model of comprehensive neighborhood schools, to a portfolio district that attempts to offer the community a variety of schooling options to every family. In addition, families will also have a myriad of public charter schools to choose from, some even authorized by, or partnered with, the BUPSD.
As the legislation requires, the schools must institute a multitude of reforms to realize the ultimate goal of tripling the number of students in high-quality seats by 2017. Of particular note is the plan to invest in and integrate high-leverage system reforms across all schools. Talent recruitment and capacity building moved to the forefront within this measure of identifying school building leaders who are able to move the reform agenda along at the school and district levels. This paradigmatic shift within the BUPSD has created a need for school leaders with not only the willingness to embrace reforms, but also the wherewithal to carry a reform agenda along within an often polarized environment.

**Overview of the Study**

This study engaged the inaugural cohort (2014-2015) of participants in a district-sanctioned principal preparation program, the Aspiring Principals Program (APP), an affiliate program of a nationally-recognized program of the NYC Leadership Academy (NYCLA). NYCLA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to prepare and support passionate, high-quality educators to lead schools that accelerate student learning and to increase the capacity of systems across the country to develop and support such educational leaders ("NYC Leadership Academy," 2015). NYCLA began serving NYC public schools in 2003, and expanded outside of the city and the state in 2008 with programs like APP, to provide short- and long-term consulting services to various schools, districts, and non-profit organizations. The APP currently has over 500 graduates nationally and has been fully adopted in six states, in addition to holding service contracts within 26 states and international contracts in Columbia and Brazil ("Aspiring Principals Program," 2015).

BUPSD partnered with NYCLA in 2014 to prepare ten “Aspiring Principals” to lead an urban school, and district, through comprehensive reform. The APP is designed for educators
with at least three years of classroom teaching experience and an interest in transforming under-performing schools within the BUPSD community (BUPS, 2014). The APP operates in three distinct phases, the first of which includes a five-week summer intensive that simulates challenges faced by a typical district principal. The second phase is an 11-month, school-based residency under the mentorship of an experienced district principal, followed by the third phase, a summer transitioning period that prepared the Aspiring Principals to take over their own school. Participants are paid $75,000 for their residency year and they become eligible for an Ohio Alternative Principal License upon successful completion of the program. Participants must also agree to a five-year service commitment, which includes their 11-month residency, to the BUPSD (BUPS, 2014).

This study examined the experiences of seven “graduates” [researcher’s term] of the 2014-2015 APP in BUPSD. Eight of the ten original cohort members fully completed the program; of the seven who agreed to participate in the study, six acquired a principalship upon completion of the program, and one acquired an assistant principalship. The non-participating APP graduate also acquired an assistant principalship upon completing the program. The study encompassed a qualitative examination of the principals’ understandings of their experiences within the APP and how they made sense of their personal transitions into their principalships, specifically into their role as leaders of school reform. And with the prevailing placement of reform fixed within the near and distant futures for urban districts across Ohio and the country, this study contributed to a void in the qualitative urban school leadership reform literature. This is particularly valuable given the recent growth and prevalence of innovative non-traditional principal training programs, like APP, across Ohio and the nation. The qualitative findings also lend themselves to compliment the breadth of quantitative findings on the urban school leader
and their relevance to school reform and their subsequent impact on student achievement and student performance outcomes.

**Problem Statement**

Despite various efforts of reform within the Buckeye Urban Public School District (BUPSD), academic growth over the last few decades has been minimal (Ryan, 2012). The 2015 Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), a NCLB-authorized, multiyear feasibility study of district-level assessments of the National Assessment of Educational Progress ("NAEP Overview," 2015), results indicate that the average score for BUPSD fourth and eighth graders in mathematics and reading is lower than the average score for public school students in large cities across the U.S. ("District Profiles: Buckeye," 2015). The last two years of student achievement data (2013-2014 & 2014-2015) reported by the Ohio Department of Education not only reiterates that the Buckeye Urban Public Schools are underperforming in student achievement, but it indicates that the district is maintaining an underperforming measurement in gap closing, K-3 literacy, student progress, and high school graduation rates ("Buckeye Urban Public School: 2014-2015 Report Card," 2016; "Buckeye Urban Public Schools: 2013-2014 Report Card," 2015) A breakdown of the district’s 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 performance outcomes are listed in Table 1.
Table 1


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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance Index</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicators Met</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gap Closing</td>
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<td>10.3%</td>
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<td>K-3 Literacy Improvement</td>
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<td>Overall</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lowest 20%</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Graduation Rates</td>
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<tr>
<td>4-Year</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-Year</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
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*Note.* Performance index measures how many students passed state achievement test. Indicators met measures how well students did in meeting proficient levels on state tests in grades 3-8 and grades 10 and 11. Gap closing measures how well students are doing in reading, math, and high school graduation. Annual measurable objectives compare performance of students groups (e.g. economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities) to state goals for all students. K-3 literacy measures if more students are learning to read in grades kindergarten through 3rd grade. Progress (value added) measures progress for students in math and reading in grades 4-8. Value added specifically measures if students achieve a year’s worth of growth in a year’s worth of schooling. Graduation rates measure the percentage of students who enter the ninth grade and graduate four or five years later ("Buckeye Urban Public School: 2014-2015 Report Card," 2016; "Buckeye Urban Public Schools: 2013-2014 Report Card," 2015).

Given the state of urgency to realize change predicated by NCLB and the recently authorized ESSA legislation, drastic transformation efforts had to be enacted within the Buckeye Urban community, if any level of sustainable reform was to be realized within the city by 2017 (BUPS, 2014). In addition to the typical responsibilities that fall within the purview of a school principal (e.g. building and resource management, teacher evaluation and training, and student discipline) urban school reform leadership within the 21st century has placed additional challenges on principals that often require them to possess a unique skillset in order to meet the demands that their environments require. The burden for Ohio school leaders has also increased
due to the demands required to improve learning outcomes associated with the recently adopted Common Core State Standards and the adoption of a more rigorous competency-based assessment system for students. School leaders are also faced with a more demanding evaluation system for their teachers. And in urban districts undergoing reform, like BUPSD, principals are faced with even greater challenges than most.

**Purpose Statement**

As traditional principal training programs maintain their inability to keep up with the ever-changing demands of the reform-laden urban principalship, more innovative, non-traditional principal training programs, like the Aspiring Principals Program (APP), are likely to continue to be developed to better meet the needs of underperforming schools and school districts across the country. As these programs grow in number and expand in reach and their graduates begin to assume leadership roles in reform-driven school buildings across the nation, it becomes imperative to understand how those that go through such programs understand their experiences and make sense of their transitions into the reform-focused principalship.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to explore how graduates of the APP, a program developed to help lead school- and district-level reform within the Buckeye Urban Public School District, understood and made sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader. As indicative of the double-hermeneutic nature of IPA research, the researcher set out to interpret the participants’ interpretations of their transitions into the role of school reform leader during their time in the APP. The interpretations examined the experiences of school leader development under the auspices of reform and provided critical insight into how these experiences influenced the school leaders’ transitions into their principalships—specifically into their role as leaders of school reform. The researcher was able
draw conclusions from the convergent and divergent themes that addressed their respective transformations throughout the program.

**Research Question**

The question guiding this research was: How do graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program in the Buckeye Urban Public School District understand and make sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader?

**Theoretical Framework**

The anthropological framework of liminality was used as a theoretical lens for this study. Liminality is a three-phase progression where individuals are within a state of transition and are stripped of their possessed status and authority, while not yet having acquired the status and authority of the forthcoming stage (Turner, 1987). As Anderson and Shirley (1995) noted, one must understand a principal’s fears and aspirations if one is to understand the relationship between the principal and school reform. Therefore, it is imperative that school districts understand who their school leaders are when they plan to engage in any attempts at reform. Doing so will help demonstrate who they are likely to “become” in the face of reform.

Liminality, an anthropological framework first described by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1960 in *The Rites of Passage* and then further expanded by Victor Turner in 1964 in *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*, describes a state in which participants are stripped of their usual status and authority (Anfara, 1997). Anfara (1997) noted that all “rites of passage” are marked by three distinct phases, the first of which Turner (1987) described as separation, or a level of detachment from an existing social or cultural context. The second is the liminal stage, or the period of transition itself, which occurs when the individual is “betwixt and between” the prior and new social and cultural contexts (Turner,
The transition is a state of ambiguity for the individual, one where the subject has few, or none of the attributes of the past, or future state and where the subject exists outside of the structure of roles and statuses within society (Anfara, 1997). Hurlock et al. (2008) questioned if one can truly know oneself without the “in-betweens” throughout life, the “in-betweens” here being the liminal period, or the site of transition. Liminality is the process of leaving one condition and entering another, which often serves as a threshold of nothingness between the old and the new (Hurlock et al., 2008). The third and final stage is reaggregation, or when passage from the old to the new is consummated. Complete transition occurs when the individual operates within a social or cultural context that is now defined and stable by virtue of clearly defined rights and obligations of the new context (Anfara, 1997).

Turner, a cultural anthropologist who spent his early career researching the rituals of the Ndembu tribe in Northwestern Zambia (Junker, 2013), contended that “rites of passage” are found in all societies, and noted that, “van Gennep himself defined ‘rites of passage’ as ‘rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age’” (Turner, 1987, p. 47). Turner described the liminal period as a ritualistic and inter-structural process of transition. Oftentimes the transitional-being is defined by a name or symbol, such as “initiate.” It is the arcane knowledge obtained during the liminal period that changes the liminal being (Turner, 1987). The APP program has set out to specifically prepare these educators in the art of successfully leading reform in schools that have been challenged for decades. Turner noted that liminality can be described as a stage of reflection where undoing, dissolution, and decomposition are met with growth, transformation, and reformation.
Methodology

This study was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of seven school leaders (six principals and one assistant principal) who were graduates of the inaugural cohort of the Aspiring Principals Program within the Buckeye Urban Public School District. The study utilized face-to-face, semi-structured interviews as a primary source by which to generate data for examination. Written responses of experiences were offered as an optional data collection effort by the researcher as a means to provide a richer context to the interview data. The researcher also completed reflection statements upon the completion of each interview and also completed journaling exercises throughout the data collection and data analysis process. The data was triangulated for each participant to identify themes. The triangulation process was then completed across all participants to identify subordinate and superordinate themes.

Definitions of Key Terminology

Authorizer (charter school). Authorizing organizations were initiated by State [Ohio] Legislature to sponsor the creation of and monitor the activities of community (charter) schools ("Welcome to OACSA," 2015).

Common Core State Standards. “The Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live. Forty-three states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have voluntarily adopted and are moving forward with the Common Core” ("About the standards," 2015, para. 4).
High Quality Seats. Are classroom seats within schools rated “A” or “B” by the state of Ohio. Ratings are based on a combination of three measures, performance index and value added for K-8 schools and performance index and graduation rates for high schools (O'Donnell, 2015a).

Rites of Passage. Are “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (Turner, 1987, p. 47). Turner noted that the most prominent rites of passage is a man’s movement through his lifetime – birth, puberty, marriage, and death are prime examples.

Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA). “The Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) is designed to explore the feasibility of using National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to report on the performance of public school students at the district level. As authorized by federal law, NAEP has administered the mathematics, reading, science, and writing assessments to samples of students in selected urban districts public schools” ("Trial Urban District Assessment," 2015, para. 1). The NAEP is “the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. Paper-and-pencil assessments are conducted periodically in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and in Technology and Engineering Literacy (TEL)” ("NAEP Overview," 2015, para. 1).

Organization of Study

This thesis is broken into five chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the study and provides an overview of school leadership, school reform, and the significance this study provides to the field of principal preparation and school reform. The chapter also reviewed the problem of practice and provided an overall statement of purpose. The research question guiding this study was followed by an overview of the theoretical framework and the methodological approach that supported the inquiry. Key terminology was also defined.
Chapter 2 provides a literature review of previous research and related material relevant to the study. The chapter is broken into four sections. The first section reviews two key elements of education reform: the first provides a historical lens of the modern educational landscape in America and the role school reform has played within it; the second reviews the literature relevant to the role that the school leader has played within the educational reform movement. The second section reviews the literature relevant to principal preparation. The third section reviews the literature relevant to the theoretical underpinnings of liminality, and the fourth section summarizes the review of the literature on school reform, the review of literature on principal preparation, and the review of the literature on liminality and provides a comprehensive rationale for the relevance and value this study adds to the discourse on urban education reform and school leader preparation.

Chapter 3 provides a methodological review for the study. The chapter begins with an introduction for the study and situates the study within a social constructivist worldview. A rationale is provided for the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach. The chapter provides a review of the position of the researcher and an overview of the participant selection criteria. Data collection and analysis methods are also reviewed. Trustworthiness of the researcher, limitations, and delimitations are also discussed before the summary of the chapter.

Chapter 4 provides a review of the findings from the study and an analysis of the data obtained. The chapter begins with an introduction and reviews the goals and objectives of the study. The rest of the chapter is broken into three sections: the first provides a descriptive background for each of the seven study participants; the second provides an overview of the four superordinate themes and thirteen subordinate themes generated by the data analysis process; the
third provides a conclusion of the study’s findings and specifically addresses the convergence and divergence of themes across participants.

Chapter 5 reviews the purpose of the study and summarizes the methods and procedures used. The chapter summarizes the results identified from the data analysis process and reviews implications for theory, research, and practice. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the research findings and offers conclusions and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The American education system and its associated attempts at reform have been thoroughly researched and analyzed. Within the greater educational landscape, the sub-structure of the urban education ecosystem has received more attention from researchers due to repeated failures at reform, both localized and systemic. Mullen and Patrick (2000) noted that great inequities have been created within American schools for the underclass. Mullen and Patrick (2000) suggested that national education policy has focused on national goals, curricula, and testing, and often puts urban settings at a disadvantage. Within the reform movement, there is debate as to how to best “turn-around” a failing school. Despite the variability of perspectives, the school leader is often heralded as the backbone of education reform at the building level (Carlin, 1992; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Huang et al., 2012; Lashway, 2003; Marcos, Whitmer, Foland, & Vouga, 2011). Studies that have explored the role and purpose of the principalship in school reform have shown that understanding the principal is critical to implementing successful urban school reform (White-Smith, 2012). White-Smith (2012) noted that much of the research has shown that principal leadership, through its effect on teachers, can positively affect student outcomes. Leithwood (2010) noted that most districts that have grown student performance through reform have provided their principals with opportunities to develop their capacities as instructional leaders. This instructional leadership development approach creates a direct line of influence from the principal to the teacher. Leithwood (2010) further noted that these same districts often circumvented university-based principal preparation programs in their principal development and they often found success through the creation and utilization of their own self-developed principal preparation initiatives.
As schools and districts look to grow and develop strong reform leaders, innovative principal preparation programs, like the Aspiring Principals Program (APP), have been and continue to be created to take aspiring school leaders and prepare them for the rigors of the reform-centric principalship. The purpose of this research study was to explore how graduates of a non-traditional principal preparation program, specifically the APP, within the Buckeye Urban Public School District (BUPSD), understood and made sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader. Understanding the interpretation of the aspiring school leader’s transition into a school reform leadership role was critical to understanding the role of school leader development and how elements of the principal preparation program manifest themselves into the leadership behaviors and reform practices of the school leader. To carry out this study, a qualitative methodology was employed. To support this inquiry, a literature review was conducted and the first section of this chapter reviews two key elements of the education reform agenda:

1. Element I provides a historical review of the modern educational landscape and the role reform has played within it.

2. Element II focuses on the principalship and highlights, from the available literature, the role the principal has played within the reform movement.

The second section provides a review of the literature relevant to school leader preparation. This review highlights the research that examines the variety of approaches to school leader development, as well as provides an overview of the program design elements that tend to recur within the literature of “successful” principal preparation. The third section highlights the contextual underpinnings of liminality and identifies it relevance to the study. The fourth section summarizes the review of literature on education reform, school leader preparation, and liminality, and then provides a synthesized rationale for the study in general.
Educational Landscape

In October of 1957, the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik space satellite into orbit around the Earth. Iorio and Yeager (2011) noted that in addition to igniting a space race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, this launch also kicked off a myriad of education improvement efforts, with a particular focus on science education. While education was viewed primarily as a state and local municipality effort, the tensions of the Cold War era, and the fears of lost dominance and threats to national security, led the federal government to pass the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). The NDEA helped to ensure that American citizens would compete with the Soviet Union in scientific and technical fields. As a result, support for all levels of schooling was created, with particular attention paid to the improvement of elementary and secondary education ("The federal role in education," 2015).

The 1950s and 1960s also marked a time when teacher education was undergoing major changes (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). Iorio and Yeager noted that licensing, credentialing, and changing curriculums attempted to professionalize the teaching industry. As anti-poverty and civil rights laws began to take shape during the 1960s and 1970s, a plethora of education reform initiatives were brought forth by the federal government ("The federal role in education," 2015). Given that national political leaders saw education as a means of promoting equality and providing equal opportunity (Iorio & Yeager, 2011), passage of laws like Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 positioned civil rights enforcement as a fundamental focus of the U.S. Department of Education ("The federal role in education," 2015).

The turbulent landscape during the 1950s and 1960s provided an opportune backdrop for the passage of two other significant pieces of legislation during the presidency of Lyndon
Johnson. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Higher Education Act (HEA), both passed in 1965, were reform efforts designed specifically to address the needs of poor urban and rural areas and needy college students, respectively ("The federal role in education," 2015). ESEA brought about major reforms for public education at all levels and it provided districts and states funding (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). In addition, ESEA based aid on the financial need of the students and not the financial needs of the schools themselves. In the beginning, ESEA had a broad plan to achieve equity within the public education system. Major focal points included: the education of low-income families; school libraries, textbooks, instructional materials, educational research and teacher training; improvement of educational programs; strengthening of state departments of education; help for disabled students; bilingual education; equal access to education; reduction of the achievement gap; and the promotion of parental involvement (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). In 1980, Congress established the Department of Education as a cabinet-level agency to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access. ("The federal role in education," 2015).

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan appointed a National Commission on Excellence in Education to assess the condition of K-12 public schools in the country. The outcomes of the 18-month study were less than favorable and the commission reported that “our Nation is at risk” ("A nation at risk," 1983, p. 1). The commission (1983) noted that the educational foundations of the nation had been “eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity” (p. 1) and it was this weakened foundation that was left to support American prosperity, security, and civility. In order to keep and improve upon the slim competitive edge America held within the world’s various markets, the commission (1983) declared that the country must dedicate itself “to the reform of the
educational system for the benefit of all – old and young …, affluent and poor, and majority and minority” (p. 2). The report was a call-to-action to the country and it generated tremendous political, media, and public attention (Iorio & Yeager, 2011).

In response to the report’s list of risk indicators and definitions of excellence, many states began to pass laws that raised the bar with respect to learning standards and achievement expectations for all students (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). The report’s varied goals of equity and high-quality schooling for all children was seen as a testament to how the country’s efforts began to focus on the development of all students (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). The report also called for a commitment to life-long learning. As the commission noted, for the first time in U.S. history, the young generation would be less skilled and less educated upon high school graduation than their parents’ generation ("A nation at risk," 1983). As predicted by the commission, the country would find itself within an “information age” and the only hope for survival, as a nation, would be to create a great “Learning Society.” A “learning society” holds, as a basic tenant, a belief that all members should have the opportunity to learn to their fullest capacity, from childhood through adulthood. A “learning society” also holds a belief that education is important, not only for what it can do for one’s career, but for what it can do for one’s quality of life ("A nation at risk," 1983).

In May of 1991, President George H. W. Bush released America 2000: Excellence in Education Act, a 9-year national strategy designed to achieve six educational goals outlined by the President and the state governors at the 1989 Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia. America 2000 was built on a foundation of four overarching themes ("America 2000," 1991):

1. Create better and more accountable schools for students.

2. Create a new generation of American schools for tomorrow’s students.
3. Transform America into a nation of students.

4. Transform communities into places where learning will happen.

These four themes were then upheld by six national goals ("America 2000," 1991):

1. Readiness for School: By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

2. High School Completion: By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

3. Student Achievement and Citizenship: By the year 2000, American students will leave fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will enforce that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in a modern economy.

4. Science and Mathematics: By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

5. Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning: By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

6. Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools: By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

As America 2000 also promoted school choice, there was a proliferation of various schooling options; charter schools, magnet schools, for-profit private schools, and homeschooling began to take hold across America as a result of less than desirable traditional public schooling options available for many families ("America 2000," 1991). Soon thereafter, The Clinton Administration brought forth Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994 to turnaround failing school reform efforts of the past (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). President Clinton endorsed key reform proposals of America 2000 under the rubric of Goals 2000, largely in part to his key role in outlining America 2000 during his tenure as Governor of Arkansas during the

In 2002, President George W. Bush set forth another major ESEA reauthorization that had significant bipartisan support (Iorio & Yeager, 2011): the NCLB. The Act brought in a culture of testing, where all children were to be assessed for basic skills in grades three through eight and then once in high school. Schools were also required to make adequate yearly progress (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). To meet the demands mandated within NCLB, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were created to provide a curriculum of excellence for the nation ("Common core state standards," 2015). Today, 46 states have fully adopted the common core ("Common core state standards," 2015). The CCSS “help ensure that all students, no matter where they live, are prepared for success in postsecondary education and the workforce. Common standards … help ensure that students are receiving a high quality education consistently, from school to school and state to state” ("Common core state standards," 2015, para. 1). Along with the CCSS, testing of the new standards has also been on the national education agenda. For example, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is a consortium of states that collectively make policy and test design decisions about their state assessment regarding student learning ("States - Participating states," 2015). During the 2014-2015 school year, 11 states (including Ohio) and the District of Columbia took part in the PARCC assessments to measure student learning ("States - Participating states," 2015). Ohio, the site of this study, dropped out of the PARCC consortium in June of 2015 and decided to contract with
another test provider, American Institutes for Research, for the 2015-2016 school year (O'Donnell, 2015b).

President Barack Obama and his administration brought forth yet another change to the federal educational landscape. December 2015 saw another reauthorization of ESEA and the resignation of the President’s Secretary of Education. President Obama and his administration delivered the Every Students Succeeds Act, which many are suggesting is a reversal of its predecessor, the NCLB ("The Every Student Succeeds Act: Explained," 2016), and brings with it a “return of educational authority from the federal government to the state and local level” (Franquiz & Ortiz, 2016). While the legislative requirements mandated under NCLB are still in large-part in place until the 2017-2018 school year, ESSA brings forth a host of reforms.

Under ESSA, states will still have to submit accountability plans to the U.S. Department of Education, but they can now pick their own goals so long as they address test proficiency, English-language proficiency, and graduation rates ("The Every Student Succeeds Act: Explained," 2016). States are also required to add at least one accountability measure of a more qualitative nature, such as student engagement, postsecondary readiness, or school climate. States also still must pay close attention to their lowest performing schools, or schools that reside within the bottom five percent of performers ("The Every Student Succeeds Act: Explained," 2016). Districts will have to develop school-specific interventions for their low-performing schools.

ESSA still requires the testing of students in grades three through eight and once in high school. ESSA maintains the federal requirement of 95% participation on tests ("The Every Student Succeeds Act: Explained," 2016). ESSA brings forth some changes to the language around English-Language Learners and students in special education, primarily placing a priority
on these students’ success. ESSA also brings about block-grant programs to consolidate dozens of other federal programs and it highlights programs focused on preschool development, evidence-based research and innovation, and parent engagement ("The Every Student Succeeds Act: Explained," 2016).

The Principalship

West, Peck, and Reitzug (2010) noted that there have been many relevant histories of the principalship in the U.S., where the position found its origin in the 19th century. Carlin (1992) noted that the word “principal” goes back to the developing role of the teacher. During the rise of the multi-teacher school building, the principal teacher appeared in American schools (Carlin, 1992). Carlin described how the principal teacher was considered a master teacher who led the other teachers in the building and, through the position’s evolution, the principal teacher became the one who was able to “lead.” This leadership capacity is what brings us to the modern day school principal. West et al. (2010) noted that, despite this progressive history, there has been little attention paid to the principalship within urban schools.

Since its inception, the principalship has been a position with significant yet competing responsibilities (West et al., 2010). The principal is often up against a demanding work schedule, coupled with limited control and a lack of personal and professional time. In today’s culture of increased accountability and demands for student success, the principal is often the only individual linked directly to a school’s academic performance. This is an important area for discovery, even more so in the urban context as the need for improvement is even greater and the stakes are higher.

West et al. (2010) noted that principals, and urban principals in particular, historically held their positions for many years. In today’s climate, however, this is no longer the case, as the
principal is often first in line for dismissal if schools do not show signs of improvement. Research also shows that a more challenging the school environment leads to a greater tendency to change principals (Marcos et al., 2011). White-Smith and White (2009) noted that low-income black and Hispanic children in urban schools achieve less than their middle-class white counterparts. It is also suggested that many urban schools engage in discriminatory practices, like tracking and labeling, given the over-representation of black and Hispanic students in special education programs. White-Smith and White (2009) contended that the urban principal’s role is quite complex and often complicated by urban issues such as drugs, homelessness, migrant student populations, and violence.

West et al. (2010) noted that before any city embarks on a long-term reform agenda, their best first step would be to listen to their principals. In their own narrative research study, West et al. noted that three implications arose from the pressures placed on urban school principals, the first of which may result in serious psychological and related health outcomes (e.g. depression) as a result of long work hours and demanding internal and external pressures. Mills and Niesche (2014) noted that for leaders working in disadvantaged schools, leadership is an emotional labour, one that often evokes a variety of emotions like anxiety, guilt, anger, passion, excitement, and indignation at the injustices for the students and communities in which they serve (p. 120). The second implication outlined by West et al. (2010) is urban school principal turnover. The final implication is an inability to sustain any type of urban school reform. White-Smith and Smith (2009) further noted that the divisions of race and class, which are most prevalent in urban environments, affect school reform efforts, as well.

A 1992 Education and Urban Society article noted one area of reform that almost all reformers felt needed immediate attention: the leadership at the school building level (Carlin,
Carlin noted that in excellent schools, the principal makes the difference, and it is the principal who offers the single most immediate route to school reform. Therefore, it is the strengthening of that position that reform must be centred around. Carlin suggested that a change to the employment hierarchy of the principalship is the most effective way to both quick and lasting reform. Carlin’s primary contention with the principalship was the limited amount of accountability; however, he noted that reformed education requires principals with vision and an opportunity to communicate and infuse it. While accountability levels have risen, Carlin knew that principals required the right tools to successfully complete their duties. As indicated by the history of the principal teacher, the principal has always been the instructional leader of their school and the one responsible for the success across the entire teaching-learning continuum.

Plenty of research indicates principal leadership, via its effect on teachers, can positively affect student outcomes (Anderson & Shirley, 1995; Carlin, 1992; Thomas & Fitzhugh-Walker, 1998; White-Smith, 2012; White-Smith & White, 2009). In their study of transformational leadership for large-scale school reform, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) suggested that school leadership has an important influence on the likelihood that teachers will change their classroom practices. Miller (2013) suggested that principal leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors that impact student success. The demands placed upon principals in today’s schools, particularly the lowest-performing urban schools, like the handling of day-to-day administrative tasks, coupled with the need to improve teaching and learning, suggest why many principals are falling short. Miller noted that principals today are insufficiently prepared to take on the difficult role of school leadership in today’s high-accountability climate.

Miller, President of the Wallace Foundation, references The Wallace Foundation’s 2012 report, The Making of the Principal, and noted how traditional principal training programs at the
roughly 500 university-based programs have failed to keep pace with the evolving role of principals over the years. The lack of development within university educational leadership development programs is producing what Geijsel, Sleegers, Leithwood, and Jantzi (2003) referred to as a transactional style of leadership—leadership that is only sufficient enough to maintain the status quo. Leithwood (Geijsel et al., 2003), who is credited with initiating the examination of transformational leadership within the field of education, suggested that a reform driven leadership approach can bring about change and innovation within a school. Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2006) model of transformational school leadership outlined three broad leadership practices capable of bringing about successful reform in schools: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization.

When Miller (2013) spoke to the proliferation of principal preparation programs in schools of education across the country, he addressed the void in the research that investigates how participants of such programs experience their development with respect to leading school reform. In making sense of the principal preparation experience, it also becomes important to examine the emotional well-being of the leader that is preparing to be thrown into the volatile school-reform arena. While Mills and Niesche (2014) examined the emotional demands on one principal in their case study of a disadvantaged school undergoing reform in Queensland, Australia, they contended that the results resonate with researchers studying leadership experiences undertaken in disadvantaged contexts from around the world. Mills and Niesche (2014) suggested that much of school reform is born out of crisis and, as a result, principals construct themselves and are often constructed within “hero” narratives. The heroic act of leading a school out of crisis has a variety of emotional implications for the principal, but also for others involved within the reform initiative (Mills & Niesche, 2014). Mills and Niesche
(2014) noted that this type of fear-based reform often becomes performative more so than substantive.

In a case study involving 36 schools in nine countries (Finland, Greece, Ireland, United Kingdom, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands), Michalak (2009) explored leadership strategies used by successful principals facing challenging urban contexts. The findings suggested that several interconnected strategies are essential for leadership success in these challenged urban schools. Mills and Niesche (2014) noted that principals move into the principalship to make a difference in student learning. The problem is that with the position comes the demands to meet policy expectations, as well as demands to manage a staff with varying needs. From an in-depth review of urban principal leadership across the globe, Michalak (2009), in accordance with Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), suggested that essential principal strategies center on setting the direction for their school, developing their team, and redesigning the organization. In addition, Michalak (2009) also suggested that additional attention needs to be paid directly to changing the culture of the school. Michalak further noted that targeting an important, visible, and attainable first goal is critical to overall principal success. Michalak reported that all 36 participants in his study set very similar directions for their schools early into their tenures. The principals reported that securing the building and refocusing the school on teaching and learning were their primary objectives early on. In addition, each principal noted that they tried to improve the physical conditions of their schools to be more conducive to learning. The principals often described how they needed to adopt the role of instructional leader and be the one that could model effective teaching and learning. This again points to the historical role of the principal teacher manifesting itself into today’s reform rhetoric.
With respect to developing people, Michalak explained how the principals noted that a strong emphasis on professional development for the entire staff evolved into a belief that principals and teachers were the most important asset of the school. The principals within the study stood firm in their belief that in order to realize true reform, they could not passively accept conditions for what they were. Instead, they acted in creative and proactive ways and they believed that successes were dependent upon how active they were. As these actions became more evident, the principals set out to redesign their schools by changing school values and beliefs by establishing vision, setting direction, building relationships, strengthening morale, and raising expectations. Michalak noted how the principals did not lead from the foundation of power and control, but used their influence to empower teachers and others to act, many times in ways that were different from ways they may had acted in the past. The principals also made reference to their intentions to become parts of, rather than apart from the communities in which they operated (Michalak, 2009).

Throughout their multi-site case study of four principals, White-Smith and White (2009) observed that principals’ perceptions of their reform work was directly related to successful implementation of the reform itself. Seven major themes, categorized into three superordinate themes, were identified as a result of the author’s analysis of the principal interviews:

1. Understand the principal’s roles(s) within the reform effort – intended outcomes, ancillary outcomes, and unintended outcomes

2. Principal interactions – administrative coordination and layers of accountability

3. Strategies and skills developed in new role as principal – utilization of external assistance and bridging alliances cross-institutionally

To successfully implement reform, White-Smith and White (2009) pointed out that principals must take the existing culture and structure of the school as a starting point and then
utilize external pressures that support their efforts to bring about actual change. White-Smith and White suggested a research gap exists between principals’ perceptions of school reform leadership and that of external reform entities’ perceptions of school change leadership. Success will come from transcending the gap that exists between these two realities. Sondergeld and Koskey (2011) supported this notion by suggesting that sustained reform must be co-constructed from both bottom-level and top-level representatives working together throughout the development and implementation phases of the effort.

Weiss (1995) noted that attempts at educational reform in the latter part of the twentieth century simply shifted decision making authority from one place to another, and suggested that in the reform efforts of the early 1980s, decision-making saw a shift from the school district to the state legislature. The latter part of the 1980s saw the decision-making focus shift back to the district, many times making its way down to the school building level. The presumption with this approach is that different people will make different, and hopefully better, decisions with regard to student learning. Weiss developed a conceptual framework that suggested that different people bring different interests, ideologies, and information to the decision-making process. Each of the three elements overlap, and all three of the elements exist within a fourth element: institutional rules and culture. Schools are complex systems with a variety of factors working in conjunction and in opposition to one another all the time (Sondergeld & Koskey, 2011). Dantley (2010) suggested that educational leadership designs need to require all practicing and prospective school leaders to contextualize the responsibilities of school leadership within the values, predispositions, and assumptions they individually hold.

Weiss (1995) further noted that every individual decision within a reform effort is iterative and a constant interplay among interests, ideology, and information. While principals
are more likely than teachers to promote large scale reforms to curriculum and building organization, Weiss suggested that the overlaying institutional element as well as its historical structures, rules, policy changes, and norms tend to shape what teachers believe in and how to react to and support school-based reform initiatives.

Similarly, Dantley (2010) suggested that educational leaders who use purpose-driven leadership tend to find the inner-strength to resist both the systemic inequities in the educational system and the oppressive forms of injustice dispersed throughout society. Dantley described the dissonance that is often created between what school leaders are asked to do and what they often value and believe. Such transformative leaders are those who engage in a process of critical spirituality that aligns personal efficacy and communal efficacy. The former focuses on self-reflection and interpretation and the latter focuses on creativity and action to move one’s school beyond the status quo of injustice and mediocrity (Dantley, 2010).

Thomas and Fitzhugh-Walker (1998) contended that the urban principal who exercises transformational leadership understands the process of school restructuring. They also note that the principal’s personal experiences influence their behavior. This brings into question the training opportunities that prepared principals for the challenges of leading and reforming urban schools. While much focus has been placed upon the school leader, it is important to mention that modern day reform efforts potentially weakened the efforts of the urban school teacher (Settlage & Meadows, 2002). Ultimately, it circles back to the school leader being responsible to the teaching staff as their guide and mentor.

Despite a wealth of quantitative and qualitative analysis of school leaders and their impacts on school performance, there are very few qualitative inquiries into the preparation and personal transition experiences of aspiring principals of non-traditional principal preparation
programs. Along these lines, Hallinger and Anast (1992) engaged in a case study analysis of the Indiana Principals Leadership Academy (IPLA) through observations and interviews to acquire principals’ perceptions of whether the IPLA was accomplishing its goals and objectives. The IPLA differs from the APP in that IPLA engages current practicing principals and takes them through an 18-day professional development program, whereas as the APP program takes aspiring principals and takes them through a year-long principal immersion experience to prepare them for the rigors of school leadership that is rooted in school reform. The APP has a pass-fail element upon completion of the in-school residency component completed under the guidance of a mentor principal; IPLA is structured around four content domains: leadership, school programs, school culture, and communication (Hallinger & Anast, 1992).

Hallinger and Anast noted that a principal’s vision of their role affects their leadership within the school. IPLA identified four role-descriptors that represented ideals of a “good” principal: instructional leader, team player, role model, and change agent (Hallinger & Anast, 1992). Hallinger and Anast posited that their research revealed that the principals participating in IPLA provided the principals with a clearer understanding of their roles as a school leader.

Hallinger and Anast also noted two trends within the data that appeared to align to the espoused goals of the IPLA: socialization to norms of collegiality and lifelong learning and the changing of the role orientation for school leaders; the former addresses how school leaders could serve as resources and mentors to one another, and the latter addresses how the school leaders need to resume the role of instructional leader (Hallinger & Anast, 1992).

Anderson and Shirley (1995) noted that like good teaching, good “principaling” is an expression of personality. Several key words describing ideal principal attributes emerged from the authors’ study of lessons learned from exploring the principalship and school reform: vision,
conviction, provoke, foster, guide, teach, coach, courage, and responsibility (Anderson & Shirley, 1995). The list makes it clear that the successful school reform leader needs to believe in the work they are doing and they need to communicate that work to others and personally engage with them in a way that brings about desired action.

**School Leader Development**

The National Association of Secondary School Principals noted over 25 years ago that attempts at school reform must include the principal (Mosrie, 1990). Mosrie discussed how the success of reform would depend largely on the efficacy of the principal’s leadership potential. As extant research reveals the connection between the quality of a principal’s preparation experience and the relative capacity of principal’s leadership (Huang et al., 2012; Young, 2015), scholars and policy makers are now beginning to recognize that successful reform must not only include the principal, but must also include a principal adequately prepared for the challenges of principalship. As the realization of the principal’s role in school reform, particularly their role in organizational change, organizational improvement, and organizational sustainability, has become more prevalent, the findings have had significant implications for school leadership training and have confirmed the importance of strategic school leader development and programming (Huang et al., 2012).

While the research backing the claims that university-based principal preparation programs are indeed limited, university-based programs have been facing increased scrutiny as a result of the high-accountability environment schools and districts now find themselves (Lashway, 2003). Lashway noted the University Council for Educational Administration’s position that university-level change is often slow; faculty are not always well connected to the field, and they are often complacent about adopting new standards for leadership preparation.
Lashway further noted that, despite the quality of principal preparation, the crux of the problem remains with the bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Marcos, Witmer, Foland, and Vouga (2011) stated, “Schools can’t get better without better principals, and you can’t put a reform into place if the principal doesn’t promote it” (p. 87). Despite the wealth of literature that speaks to the common attributes of successful school leaders (Marcos et al., 2011), there still remains a gap within the literature that definitively outlines what a successful principal preparation program looks like. Perhaps the reason for this is, as Marcos et al. stated, “there is not an exact fit for all districts as they have varying needs” (p. 92). Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2012) suggested that there is a critical void in the research on leadership preparation programs. Exploring the lived and learned experiences of the participants themselves is critical for assessing the value of the preparation program (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2012). Browne-Ferrigno and Muth’s review of an article analysis of 2,038 school leadership articles published in four leading education journals (Education Administration Quarterly, Journal of Educational Administration, Journal of School Leadership, and Planning and Changing) between 1975 and 2002 noted only 8% focused on the pre-service preparation experience of the school leaders.

Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) noted that the limited study correlating principal preparation programs and principal behavior on the job is “emblematic of the tenuous relationship between research and educational reform…” (p. 28). Despite the design components of effective principal preparation programs being well documented, there is much less known about how those components influence principal behavior (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). In their study of five innovative university-based principal preparation programs (the Educational Leadership Cohort Program at Delta State University, the University of
Connecticut’s Administrators Preparation Program, the Principals’ Institute at Bank Street College, the Educational Leadership Development Academy at the University of San Diego, and the Urban Educational Leadership Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago). Davis and Darling-Hammond identified seven common design elements that exist between the programs:

- Clear focus and values about leadership and learning around which the program is coherently organized.
- Standards-based curriculum emphasizing instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management.
- Field-based internships with skilled supervision.
- Cohort groups that create opportunities for collaboration and teamwork in practice-oriented situations.
- Active instructional strategies that link theory and practice, such as problem based learning.
- Rigorous recruitment and selection of both candidates and faculty.
- Strong partnerships with schools and districts to support quality field-based learning.

In their detailed analysis of the Educational Leadership Cohort Program at Delta State University, Griffin, Taylor, Varner, and White (2012) described how that program has “stood the test of time” given its core principle: theory without intense and on-going practical application is limited in its ability to create effective school leaders. As Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) further noted, the common attributes of the five effective leadership preparation programs often differ from the common attributes of traditional university-based principal preparation programs. In particular, all five programs align to the principles of adult learning; they center their approach to learning around experiential learning, problem-based learning, and authentic learning (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Griffin et al. (2012) specifically pointed out how the Delta State University program excels in its ability to comprehensively put all of the
components together and situate them within the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts that are impacting the Mississippi Delta region. As social structures evolved within the Delta region, so has the program. Griffin et al. (2012) also noted how the cornerstones of collaboration, instructional design, and experiential learning of the 1990’s shifted to curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leading operations for learning; and continuous improvement and culture of learning in an effort to meet the demands of the modern educational landscape. What has not changed since the program’s inception, due to its successful contribution, has been its cohort model that embraces scaffolding learning experiences (Griffin et al., 2012).

Versland (2013) noted that principal preparation programs need to provide experiences and structures that help build an aspiring principals self-efficacy. Versland also noted that leadership self-efficacy can either increase or decline based on the leadership training. Versland therefore suggested that the loss of self-efficacy for aspiring principals provides little chance for them to achieve success with school reform. Marcos et al. (2011) noted from their qualitative inquiry into the congruence of principal training and urban school leadership practice that superintendents and assistant superintendents agreed that new principals have higher turnover in more challenging school environments. Marcos et al. (2011) and Versland (2013) contended that mentoring and coaching are critical to the longevity and success of the new principal.

As principal preparation programs continue to develop, best practices recommend connecting admissions to principal preparation programs to leadership standards (Lashway, 2003). In addition to having rigorous recruitment and selection processes for students and faculty, as suggested by Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012), Lashway (2003) suggested that quality admissions include focused interview protocols, 360-degree evaluations, performance portfolios, writing samples, and assessment data. Griffin et al. (2012) noted that the Delta State
University program assesses aspiring principals through the use of eight performance-based assessments throughout their training. These formative and summative evaluations ensure progress is being made and that identified benchmarks are being met, thus ensuring success within the program (Griffin et al., 2012).

With the U.S Department of Education maintaining its position for continued innovation and transformative best-practices within education (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012), innovative non-traditional principal preparation programs are becoming increasingly popular in districts around the county (Versland, 2013). The increasing rise of “grow your own” leadership programs—programs that often exist between an institution of higher education and a school community—have shown signs of promise within urban contexts (Versland, 2013). Lashway (2003) noted that, in the modern reform-driven environment, districts can leverage relationships with university partners to aid in identifying top-quality candidates, hosting internship experiences, and having practitioners serve as mentors and faculty. The innovative “second-level” licensure method for administrators, which often includes requirements to complete formal mentoring, reflection, portfolio development, and job demonstration skills, is also gaining momentum (Lashway, 2003).

Despite the potential promise offered by non-traditional principal preparation programs, Fusarelli and Militello (2012) noted that there are often two major criticisms of “innovative” principal preparation programs:

- Rather than being truly innovative and different, many programs have minor tweaks and often resemble traditional programs.
- There is relatively little evidence with regard to the effectiveness of school leaders developed within these innovative programs.
Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) supported this criticism, suggesting that the existing “evidence” of such programs is commonly based upon self-reported data of principals and other stakeholders, and not measurable data reflective of school and student outcomes. Lashway (2003) believed that the “missing link” within education reform very well could be the research that draws correlations between principals’ preparation practices and principals’ on the job performance and ultimately student achievement.

**Liminality**

In the liminality literature, the concept of schooling itself has often been referred to as “betwixt and between,” sited as a juxtaposition of the subjective and objective worlds (Anfara, 1997). Anfara suggested that, in urban school settings where poverty is often present and the language and culture present within the homes differ from that of the majority power class within society, the beginning stages of liminality take root as these subjects often face a devaluing of their own reality. In Anfara’s (1997) own qualitative study of 24 inner city students, he concluded that school is a safe place where students can test and challenge the values of their society. This study brought forth the concept of resistance with respect to the “rites of passage.” Although Anfara suggested the need for further study of the relationship between resistance and liminality, he also showed that schools where students exhibited the least amount of resistance showed the most evidence of being liminal institutions. Anfara believed this was likely to be the case given that students exhibiting the least amount of resistance referred to feeling as if they were being treated as adults, versus children, as described by the students exhibiting large amounts of resistance.

Bettis (1996) used the concept of liminality as a construct to explore urban students’ understandings of their future and how school and the world of work played into it. Bettis noted
Turner’s (1987) paradoxical notion of the liminal state in how it mediates the macro and micro-worlds with the daily lives of the students. Given that the world itself is in transition, liminality ideally addresses the uncertainty in which the students exist (Bettis, 1996). When Turner (1987) expanded upon the concept of liminality, he was studying the homogenous society of the Ndembu tribe. Bettis (1996) spoke to the power of the liminal state giving way to equality between members, despite the diversity of variations between subjects. As noted by Turner, there is a loss of social distinctions within the liminal state and the usual social hierarchy is replaced with a type of peer equality (Bettis, 1996; V. Turner, 1987). Junker (2013) noted that liminality emerges as a space to affirm solidarity, and also noted that when a community acknowledges their multiple zones of proximal development, or their capacity to reach higher levels when working together versus working alone, “communitas” surfaces as a sign of liminal vitality and solidarity. Junker explained Turner’s (1987) description of “communitas” as a central human social requirement that often forces structures to change through social action and cooperation. As a result, anti-structures can emerge, many times through ritual, as alternatives to dominant social structures, thereby bringing about unconventional paradigms of how society should operate.

Hurlock et al.’s (2008) study of liminality on a post-secondary student’s transition through disillusionment to illumination spoke of a concept not frequented in the liminality literature—natality. Natality, the shadow of the liminal space (Hurlock et al., 2008), is the act of beginning the process of crossing beyond the threshold of the liminal space. Hurlock et al. spoke to the value of natality for the disillusionment caused from time within the liminal state. The authors further noted that continued disillusionment over a long period of time can actually put the subject at risk physically and mentally. However, if illumination is on the horizon, then
perhaps one can persevere through the paradoxical space. As Hurlock et al. noted, natality could very well be considered a meaningful pedagogical experience. In their study, Hurlock et al. discussed how their subject actually began to advocate for herself through her liminal struggle as she began her natal movement.

In Baynham and Simpson’s (2010) study of liminality and adult migrant worker’s placement within classes of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), they discussed how continued concentrations of liminality can become a way of life. Baynham and Simpson noted how the subjects of their study, many of whom are asylum seekers, were faced with liminal implications both mentally and physically. Mentally, the subjects were in an “in-between” space, oftentimes for many years, sitting between a decision regarding their refugee status. From a physical dimension, Baynham and Simpson described how the classroom itself was a liminal space. The classroom was situated within a main thoroughfare of the building, serving as a cut-through for a daycare, the restroom, and administrative offices. Baynham and Simpson suggested that the physical positioning of the ESOL classroom was consistent with the position of ESOL to the main discipline of Literacy - it had a periphery-centered relationship. The combination of the mental and physical liminal experiences over a continued period of time further complicated the progress of the subjects through and beyond their personal liminal experiences.

In their auto-ethnographic study of seasoned administrators transitioning into faculty positions within the university, Bosetti, Kawalilak, and Patterson (2008) noted how their experience within the liminal state differed from Turner’s (1987) depiction of liminal beings being ushered through a “rites of passage” by some type of guide that serves to provide stability during the uncertainty created by the process of becoming anew. Bosetti et al. (2008) described how they lacked a guide, or even a series of events, with which to shepherd them through their
transition. This instability caused confusion and anxiety as they sought validation, guidance, and support for their career transition decision. As their study revealed, Bosetti et al. noted that providing time for dialogue between liminal members, it was possible to break down power differentials, sustain a healthy community, and find value in knowledge acquired from the outside.

The liminality framework aligns with the research given the congruent nature of the Aspiring Principals entering into a common state of transition. Turner (1987) posited that transition itself is a state of being, and thus representative of the liminal stage, thereby suggesting that the separation and aggregation stages are implicated in social structure, while the initiation of the liminal stage is implicated in a “rites of passage.” Turner also noted that the transformational aspects of the liminal period are just as important as the uncertainty they create. Those that are within the liminal period are in many respects invisible, structurally, if not physical, as they are neither here nor there. This ambiguous state is said to be socially polluting to those around them—those that have not undergone the same passage into and through the liminal state. This research of exploring the understanding and sense-making of the aspiring principal’s transition into the role of school reform leader is especially salient given that the APP program is expected to grow and expand within the Buckeye Urban Public School District community, as has been suggested, by the training of a second cohort for the 2015-2016 academic year and the recruitment for a third cohort for the 2016-2017 academic year.

Summary

As education policy makers continue to strive to identify a panacea for the ills facing the American education system, and particularly that which operates within urban America, school leaders will be expected to realize outcomes whether the reform agenda handed to them is
appropriate or not. Even though strong leadership is a recurring variable in much of the school reform literature, there remains a multiplicity of thoughts as to what effective school leadership actually is (Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010). With the rise of the standards movement following the reauthorization of ESEA in 2001 with NCLB, the role of educational leadership and its associated preparation has gained attention (Provost et al., 2010). This will undoubtedly continue with the Every Student Succeeds Acts, the 2015 ESEA reauthorization. Moving along the accountability spectrum, the Common Core State Standards, and assessments like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and American Institutes for Research (AIR) have taken a strong hold within schools, often limiting the capacity of many education leaders and school reformers.

With demand for school quality at an all-time high, innovative school leader development programs are providing a valuable resource within America’s urban districts. Stepping in where traditional principal training programs have failed, innovative non-traditional programs, like the Aspiring Principals Program, have begun to take over the preparation of urban school principals. These non-traditional programs are preparing principals for the realities of leading schools within urban settings, a setting that has often been characterized as having principals serving a dual role of hero (Mills & Niesche, 2014) and martyr (West et al., 2010).

The utilization of an interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program came to understand and make sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader, revealed insights into the connections that existed between the principal’s awareness and understanding of their preparation experience and their ability to carry out reform. This awareness and understanding, viewed through a liminality lens, also provided insight into the ways the participants internalized their role as leaders of school reform and how
they progressed to become leaders capable of carrying out a reform agenda that has challenged school leaders before them. Participant reflection and interpretation also provided insight into the various programmatic design elements that seemed to support and hinder their progression into the school reform principalship.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to explore how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program (APP) came to understand and make sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader. To be able to develop an understanding of how the research participants understood and made sense of their transitions, a qualitative methodology was employed. As suggested by Maxwell (2005), qualitative researchers tend to focus on the process within a particular context. Kenny (2012) noted that knowing, as a process rather than as a product, is essential to phenomenological inquiry, especially when trying to make sense of human experience. The process involves the personal accounts of the participants and how they each transition from their current state into a new state, which for all of them was a school reform leader, serving in either a school principal or assistant principal capacity within an urban school district undergoing major reform.

Utilizing the theoretical framework of liminality as a lens to view the research participants’ transitions into the role of school reform leader, it was necessary to understand who the research participants were prior to participating in the APP, who they became during the program, and who they were after the program. To conduct this research, the following research question guided the study: How do graduates of the APP in the Buckeye Urban Public School District understand and make sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader?

Given the research design and guiding question, it was determined that utilizing a phenomenological paradigm would provide further insight into the experiences of the research participants. Phenomenology itself is concerned with exploring experiences in their own terms (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). To further draw on the interpretative nature of the research participants, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to expand upon
the phenomenological inquiry to allow for an authentic examination of the phenomenon from the participants’ perspective. Rooted in the assumption that subjective data can inform about understandings of individual experiences (Snelgrove, 2014), IPA was used to develop in-depth descriptions of human experience. These rich descriptions, which are contextual (Snelgrove, 2014), can be taken further to develop theories, models, and explanations that explain human experience (Fade, 2004).

**Research Paradigm**

Creswell (2007) suggested that five philosophical assumptions lead to an individual’s choice of qualitative research: ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetorical, and methodological assumption. The ontological assumptions lie with the researcher’s belief about reality. Creswell and Smith et al. (2009) noted that reality is subjective and that the researcher, the research participants, and the readers of the research will each approach the study with a different sense of reality. This required the researcher to utilize a methodology that allowed for varying perspectives from the research participants. The epistemological assumption speaks to the relationship between the researcher and the research participants (Creswell, 2007). This required the researcher to be able to minimize the “distance” between himself and the research participants and take steps to gain first-hand knowledge of the research site and become as close to an insider as possible with the research participants.

The axiological assumption speaks to the role that values play in the research process (Creswell, 2007). Creswell noted that the researcher must position himself within the study and that the interpretation of the information gathered is value-laden, on the part of the researcher and the research participant. The rhetorical assumption lends itself to the literary and personal nature of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). Finally, the methodological assumption
characterizes the inductive and emerging nature of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). This requires the researcher to remain flexible throughout the research process and to know that the collection and analysis of data is shaped by the researcher as meaning is being made.

Once a researcher has taken a position on the five philosophical assumptions, the researcher must then engage with a particular worldview, or a set of beliefs that guide action (Creswell, 2007). A social constructivist worldview was utilized as the foundational framework for this qualitative research study. The social constructivist tradition posits that understanding can be made from the world in which people live and work. Creswell (2009) suggested that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences. The researcher accomplishes this through open-ended questioning, which allows the complexity of the research participants’ views to become central to the analysis. Using an inductive approach to theory generation, the social constructivist attempts to make sense of the interpretations others have about the world (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2007) noted that these subjective meanings are negotiated within the research participants’ social, cultural, and historical contexts. Further, these meanings are then negotiated through the researcher’s social, cultural, and historical experiences. Fade (2004) noted that IPA is theoretically rooted in critical realism. Critical realism suggests that differences in meanings individuals attach to experiences are considered possible because they each experience different parts of reality. As Creswell suggested, the focus of all qualitative research needs to be on understanding phenomenon, rather than the reader, researcher, or participant. However, it is important to note that the interpretative nature in its entirety has a great deal to offer.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a phenomenological perspective that began in the applied psychology disciplines, particularly health psychology. Jonathan Smith,
professor in psychology at Birkbeck University of London, first introduced the IPA term in his 1996 seminal article on using IPA in health psychology. Smith was proposing a mainstream research approach that was able to capture both the experiential and qualitative domains of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Smith (1996) purported that at the time there were two distinct and opposing lines of inquiry within social psychology – social cognition and discourse analysis. Social cognition was generally a quantitative assessment of the external behaviors and internal mental states of participants. Discourse analysis assumed that verbal reports of participants cannot be easily related to underlying cognitions. In fact, they are situated in a context and are often contingent upon pre-existing discourses, and therefore a qualitative paradigm is most fitting (Smith, 1996). Smith suggested that IPA has much to offer in filling a void between these two opposing epistemologies within the health psychology domain. In particular, phenomenology and social interactionism, are two constructs within IPA that would resonate with health psychology researchers. Phenomenology’s emphasis on perception and social interactionism’s attention to interpretation provides the researcher with an opportunity to operate at a micro level, exploring individuals’ beliefs and responses to processes often only described or categorized from a macro point of view (Smith, 1996). As with leadership development, much of the research has described this phenomenon from a macro quantitative perspective. To engage with the nuances of school leadership development, within an urban setting attempting reform, a more in-depth analysis could only provide clarity to the outcomes of the leadership development process. Therefore, to enrich the cognitive model, IPA was utilized as a method of gaining insight into the understanding and sense making of school reform leader development. While the goal was not to make generalized recommendations about school reform leadership development, the opportunity presents itself to add value to the evaluation of reform practices of
leader development within urban schools. As Jirwe (2011) suggested, IPA studies are rooted in the evidence of the words of participants and while theory development is not the goal, the result can contribute to and influence theory development.

**Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA**

Shinebourne (2011) noted IPA’s underpinnings in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography offered a congruent method with the existential phenomenological paradigm, ultimately linking research with the greater corpus of psychological research. IPA offers an established and systematic approach to understanding the first-person perspective from the third-person position through a process of intersubjective inquiry and analysis (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Larkin, Eatough, and Osborn noted that the intersubjective process of sense-making is understood as situated, temporal, and distributed. Therefore, the environment in which we live constitutes the cognitive system (Larkin et al., 2011).

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is derived from the Greek meaning to bring into the light (Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011). Moran noted that phenomenology is an attempt to get to the truth; to describe phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2011). Pringle et al. (2011) suggested that the basis for the phenomenological approach is to understand the human experience. Smith et al. (2009) contended that phenomenology is a dynamic process and not just a scholarly collection of ideas. Phenomenology provides a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experiences. Phenomenology is rooted in the work of four major phenomenological philosophers: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre.
Husserl suggested that a phenomenon should be examined in the way it occurs and in its own terms (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl was interested in finding a way to accurately know one’s own experience, leading to an understanding of the essential qualities of that experience. Husserl’s suggestion was that we adopt a phenomenological attitude and direct our gaze within ourselves and understand our perceptions of the world. Therefore, phenomenological practice requires that the research participant and the researcher be both reflective and reflexive. Smith et al. noted that as we do this, we are being phenomenological. The so-called phenomenological attitude requires a phenomenological reduction, or a bracketing out of our understood- and taken-for-granted-world to open up our perceived-world (Larkin et al., 2011; Pringle et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). To ensure that phenomena under investigation remain clear of all prior supposition and assumptions, a phenomenological reduction is necessary (Larkin et al., 2011). This reduction allows for the setting aside of preconceptions in order to avoid trying to fit findings into preconceptions (Pringle et al., 2011). By doing this, the researcher can remain objective and ensure that the conclusions identified are attributed from the data and not from the biases imposed from the researcher. Our natural everyday attitudes to the world are founded upon assumptions. Bracketing allows phenomenon to rise above their everyday qualities. However, it is important to note that while a reduction may be necessary, an elimination of one’s preconceptions, if even possible, is not what is trying to be achieved, for one must examine their various assumptions of the world and determine their respective usefulness to the interpretative process. Husserl describes this point when he discusses eidetic reduction or the process of imaginative variation, where one considers various instances of a phenomenon, old and new, in order to identify key features in order to draw comparisons and establish patterns (Larkin et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009).
Heidegger, a student of Husserl, built upon Husserlian philosophy by questioning the possibility of knowledge of the lived world without that of an interpretative lens (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger began to question human existence and its relatedness to the world. He concluded that our connection to the world was a fundamental part of our existence and that a person is always a person in context, a concept that he referred to as inter-subjectivity. Smith et al. noted that within Heidegger’s discussion of reflexivity, he also posits that interpretation is essential to phenomenological inquiry. This is an important point given that the researcher set out to capture the meaning within each research participant’s transition within the APP program. The inter-subjective nature of each participant’s past experiences coming together as one during the liminal phase also enriched the thematic nature of the reflexive discourse. The inter-subjectivity of the researcher’s reflexive and reflective analysis was also valid given the duality of interpretation that exists within IPA.

Merleau-Ponty, similar to Heidegger, supported the belief that human knowledge of the world is situated and interpretative. Merleau-Ponty, however, emphasized the embodied nature of human relation to the world and it was this embodiment that created the primacy of our individual situated perspective of the world (Smith et al., 2009). Larkin et al. (2011) noted that cognition is a highly embodied and situated activity. Smith et al. (2009) noted that Merleau-Ponty saw the human body, not as an object of the world, but as a means of communicating with it. Merleau-Ponty believed the body shapes the fundamental character of our knowing, and given this, one could never completely share the experience of another, for their experience and lens is shaped by their own embodied position in the world (Smith et al., 2009). This insight was valuable to the study for individual experiences helped shape the foundation of what was achieved by the whole. Given that the inaugural cohort had three different outcomes as a result
of the APP experience, principal, assistant principal, and defector, it became apparent that the
individual was the vehicle by which one understands and makes sense of their world. And
despite their individual outcomes, it was intriguing to become aware of the significant amount of
communitas that was obtained within the participant group.

Sartre extended on the existential underpinnings of phenomenology. Sartre believed that
man is always becoming himself, and that the things absent from our embodied lives are just as
important as those things that are present, in terms of how we see the world (Smith et al., 2009).
Given that the world is largely shaped by the existence of others, Sartre believed that we are
better able to understand our own existence by the presence and absence of others. This added
relevance to the study for it brought clarity to the role the individual plays within the experience
and meaning-making for themselves and for others.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation, built upon phenomenology to create a
hermeneutic phenomenology that sought to find understanding through interpretation. Heidegger
is referenced in much of the literature on hermeneutics and he is noted as pointing out that our
relatedness, to objects of the world, is a fundamental part of our existence (Larkin et al., 2011).
Shinebourne (2011) suggested that Heidegger’s work presents hermeneutics as a prerequisite to
phenomenology, for phenomenology requires an uncovering of meanings. It is the process of
revealing and uncovering what is hidden, contended Shinebourne, that engages the question of
interpretation, or what Heidegger refers to as logos (or discourse)— a primordial human
capacity. Larkin et al. (2011) noted that the personal and the social are drawn together and are in
many respects congruent. It is the analytical nature of discourse that brings about a micro
analysis and synthesis of a phenomenon that allows for a hermeneutic stance within phenomenological inquiry (Smith et al., 2009).

Given the IPA structure of researcher to research participant, both of whom are interpreting (i.e., the research participant interpreting the phenomenon and the researcher interpreting the research participant interpreting the phenomenon), the double hermeneutic analysis or a double interpretation ensues. Kenny (2012) noted in his review of Moustakas’s heuristic method, a phenomenological inquiry of internal and personal questions, that embodied questions influence the researcher’s way of thinking, which guides the interpretative experience and ultimately the understandings one achieves. Given that interpretation is always situated, it is therefore founded upon prior experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions (Smith et al., 2009). Because the researcher did not know how any fore conception would impact the interpretation, it was imperative that the researcher critically and reflexively evaluated how any pre-understandings would impact the research (Shinebourne, 2011). This is precisely where phenomenological reduction, or bracketing comes into play. While it is hard to predict which part of one’s fore conception is relevant to the specific phenomenon, complete reduction is not probable, especially given the fact that our fore conceptions are ever-changing throughout the process of interpretation (Larkin et al., 2011; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) further noted the iterative process of IPA. Given the cyclical nature of reduction, researchers must engage with what is referred to as the hermeneutic circle, or a relationship between the parts and the whole of the phenomenon and ultimately the analysis of interpretation (Shinebourne, 2011).
Idiography

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is understood to be idiographic, essentially since it has a focus on the particular (Smith et al., 2009). The approach finds meaning in its ability to understand phenomenon from the point of view from purposefully-selected samples. Sensitivity to the context is what allows IPA to examine discourse that is grounded in varied historical, socio-cultural, and linguistic contexts (Shinebourne, 2011). In comparison to nomothetical analysis, IPA provides a deeper analysis that allows for insight into what has already been determined or hypothesized. As noted by Smith et al. (2009), the details can illuminate the flaws within existing theory for a population and may identify ways to revise the theory. Using iterative and inductive processes can also support the researcher in taking experience of the particular and applying them flexibly to the population (Smith et al., 2009).

Positionality Statement

Given the double hermeneutic nature of the analysis with IPA, it is important to identify the relationship between the researcher and the research participants. The researcher is a bi-racial (African American and Caucasian) male that grew up within a two-parent, low middle-income suburb that sits just outside of the Buckeye Urban Public School District. The researcher’s African American mother was born and raised in the Buckeye Urban community and attended Buckeye Public Schools through her high school graduation. The researcher’s mother grew up in a two-parent, low-income household with six siblings. Her family lived in public housing and was on public assistance. The researcher’s Caucasian father was also born and raised in the Buckeye Urban community. He grew up in a two-parent, low-income household with one other sibling. He lived in a four-family tenement on public assistance. The researcher’s father attended Catholic School through his high school graduation.
Neither of the researcher’s parents attended college. The researcher’s father had a blue collar job that served as the primary source of income for the family of five (two parents and three children). The researcher is the youngest of the three children. The researcher’s mother was a stay at home mom, but also had an in-home daycare that partially supported the family for a portion of the researcher’s childhood.

Upon graduation from high school, the researcher attended the local university, which resides within the Buckeye Urban community, and received both a bachelor’s and master’s degree. The researcher’s first professional position was as a college admissions officer at a small catholic institution in a middle-income suburb just outside of the Buckeye Urban community. The researcher’s primary role in this position was recruiting students from urban districts, including the Buckeye Urban community. The researcher served in this role for three years. The researcher’s second and third professional positions were that of a student advisor and a program administrator, respectively, at a local community college that resided within one of the poorest and most densely populated neighborhoods, largely due to concentrated public housing, within the Buckeye Urban community. In both of these roles, which spanned approximately 10 years, the researcher worked directly with students and families from the Buckeye Urban Public Schools and helped prepared them for the rigors and realities of a postsecondary education.

The researcher’s fourth and current professional position is that of an administrator of a not-for-profit in the Buckeye Urban community that works in direct collaboration with all public schools within the Buckeye Urban community to oversee the city’s education reform agenda. As described, the researcher has served in a variety of professional education leadership roles, but has not worked directly for the Buckeye Urban Public School System, nor has the researcher been a school principal. Outside of formal education in the field of education (Adult Learning
and Development and Organizational Leadership and Communication), the researcher has not participated in any traditional or non-traditional principal preparation programs.

The research participants all come from non-principal roles, similar to that of the researcher (one has served as an assistant principal). The research participants all have at least three years of teaching experience, dissimilar to the researcher, although all are not coming directly from teaching roles immediately prior to their enrollment within the Aspiring Principals Program.

**Participant Selection Criteria**

As Englander (2012) noted, participant selection is the initial step in the data collection process. Selection for this study was purposeful in that selection targeted graduates of the inaugural cohort (2014-2015) of Aspiring Principals Program. The original cohort, capped at 10 participants, was initially selected from an applicant pool of 153. Six of the ten were women and four were men. Eight of the original ten cohort members graduated from the program, as two members were dismissed before program completion. Six of the eight graduates were hired on as principals and two were hired on as assistant principals for the 2015-2016 school year. The researcher made contact about the study with all eight of the Aspiring graduates, and seven of the eight agreed to participate in the study. Of the seven that agreed to participate in the study, two were employees of the district prior to their engagement with the Aspiring program. Three others were living and working in or near the BUPSD community, but were not employees of the district. The remaining two were from out of state, one from North Carolina and one from Texas. In their current roles within the BUPSD, six were serving as principals and one was serving as an assistant principal. The one Aspiring graduate that elected not to participate in the
study was a BUPSD employee prior to the Aspiring Principals Program and was currently serving in an assistant principal capacity.

The research design allowed the researcher the opportunity to analyze how the program graduates transitioned into the role of a school reform leader, all the while undergoing transformation through the three liminal phases of separation, margin, and aggregation.

**Institutional Review Board**

The researcher followed specified protocols from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board on how to conduct research on human subjects. The researcher worked with the BUPSD’s organizational accountability office to acquire district-level clearance to conduct the study with building leaders. The researcher also made contact with the Director of the Aspiring Principals Program and reviewed the goals and intent of the research. As suggested by Maxwell (2005), creating the necessary relationships with research “gatekeepers” is an essential component of a research methodology. As the primary “gatekeeper” to the Aspiring Principals Program and the program’s graduates, the Director provided invaluable support to the researcher in terms of navigating district bureaucracy in order to streamline access to the building leaders.

Upon approval from the district, the researcher then submitted an application to the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board and received approval to conduct the study. The researcher then individually solicited permission from each participant to participate in the study. The researcher communicated with prospective participants via email and phone calls (see Appendix A and B for a copy of the recruitment email and phone call script, respectively). Despite the small pool of participants for the study, it was imperative that the researcher ensured that the participants were graduates of the APP program and had been hired on by the district as
a principal or assistant principal for the 2015-2016 academic year. Once participant qualification was confirmed, the researcher scheduled preliminary discussions with each participant. As suggested by Englander (2012), the preliminary discussion serves as an opportune time to establish trust, review ethical considerations, complete consent forms, and review some of the tentative research questions (see Appendix C for a copy of the Informed Consent Form).

As the researcher developed a rapport with each participant, efforts were made to create an environment conducive to producing collaborative outcomes. Collaborative outcomes support the development of improved qualitative dimensions of the APP program for future cohorts. As Maxwell (2005) suggested, the research should be participatory. This speaks directly to Wimpenny’s (2000) suggestion that phenomenological meaning must be a result of co-creation between the researcher and the participant, and not just that of the researcher’s interpretations, which will likely have differing factors imposed upon it.

Data Collection

The researcher collected data from the research participants primarily through in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D for an interview protocol). While IPA is flexible enough to allow for diversity within its data collection methods (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, 2011), Englander (2012) noted that the interview often serves as the primary data collection procedure for qualitative, human scientific research. Maxwell (2005) further noted that unstructured approaches trade generalizability and comparability for internal validity and contextual understanding. This is particularly important given the sometimes scrutinized robustness of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Giorgi, 2011).

The researcher audio taped the interviews with each participant at their desired interview location. For most participants this was their school building. Interviews were carried-out over
one 60 to 90-minute interview session. Interview recordings were immediately transcribed upon completion of the interview. While the interview remained unstructured, the researcher attempted to interview in what Wimpenny (2000) described as a structured three-stage process of establishing context of the participants’ experiences, construction of said experiences, and reflection of the meanings the experiences hold. In an attempt to establish rigor within the interviewing process, it was suggested that there be rigor in both methodological congruence and the interview process itself (Wimpenny, 2000). Quality interviews should encompass spontaneity from the interviewee, balance between interviewer and interviewee, and clarity of the story provided. As the researcher’s exposure to the phenomenon increased with each interview, development and refining of the interview process took place before each subsequent interview (Wimpenny, 2000). Wimpenny also noted that the inductive nature of IPA research creates an ideal opportunity during the semi-structured interview process to immerse the researcher into the study as a research tool himself. It was at this point that the researcher began the process of making meaning of the research participants making meaning of their own experiences transitioning into the role of a school reform leader.

Smith (2004) noted that while the semi-structured interview is often considered the exemplary form of data collection for IPA research, it is important to not exclude other forms of data collection when engaging with participants. In fact, Smith suggested that rich verbal accounts can often be obtained via other data collection methods, such as conversation and observation. Kenny (2012) supported Smith’s (2004) assertion of utilizing other data collection methods in IPA research by noting that engaging with data collection involves being receptive to information that is collected through the senses and responding to non-verbal clues and experiences. As a result, the researcher provided all participants the opportunity to submit an
optional written statement about their experiences in the APP program (see Appendix E for a request of a written statement). As Englander (2012) noted, written descriptions tend to be more concise than interviews. In the end, one participant (Aspiring 2) submitted the optional written statement. Most others declined the optional statement after they reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy. The six participants that did not complete the optional written statement indicated to the researcher that they felt that their points were effectively expressed and captured during the interview process—this includes one participant (Aspiring 1) who had already begun the written statement immediately upon completing the interview, but then decided not to submit it after reviewing her interview transcripts.

The researcher also engaged in a process of self-reflection and journaling. These data collection methods created an opportunity to triangulate data to acquire a more accurate representation than either approach could have produced alone. The beauty of qualitative inquiry, and IPA in particular, is that there is no intention to find one single answer or truth (Pringle, Drummond, et al., 2011). As Creswell (2007) noted, the important aspect of IPA research is to describe meaning for the small number of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon.

**Data Storage**

The electronic research data was stored safely and securely on a password-protected cloud storage system. The researcher also stored an additional copy of the electronic data on a password-protected personal home computer. All audio recordings of interviews were labeled and dated, and stored within a locking file cabinet at the researcher’s home office. The researcher’s interview notes, journal notes, and self-reflection notes were all labeled, dated, and stored in the same locking home office file cabinet. The collected written statement is also
labeled, dated, and stored in the locking home office file cabinet. The researcher attempted to protect the anonymity of all participants by providing pseudonyms. The researcher also used a pseudonym for the site of the study. As suggested by Creswell (2007), the researcher developed a master list of all information gathered and created a visual matrix to aid in document retrieval.

**Data Analysis**

As Maxwell (2005) noted, data analysis begins immediately after the first interview. The researcher began the process of analyzing interview recordings upon the completion of each interview. Contact with each research participant resulted in the creation of a depiction that helped to identify the process the depiction moved through in the synthesis of the data (Kenny, 2012). The researcher also reviewed interview and self-reflection notes accordingly. Journaling was a process of self-reflection that supported the researcher in identifying preliminary themes and relationships within the data. As noted by Smith et al. (2009), the goal of an IPA analysis is a joint product of the participant and the researcher. Kenny (2012) noted that a researcher must move between his internal and external worlds to bring clarity to the internal frameworks that guide choices and actions. Given the various nuances of IPA data analysis, Smith et al. (2009) supported a six-stage process to engage with the data to ensure that the result captures the essence of an interpretative methodology:

1. Reading and re-rereading: The process which allows the researcher to become immersed within the data and to “enter” into the participant’s world.

2. Initial noting: Begins the process of engaging the researcher with the phenomenon. Maxwell (2005) noted that this is a meaningful time to write memos about one’s analytical thinking regarding the data. This can be done with descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009).

3. Developing emergent themes: This is the process of mapping the connection, inter-relationships, and patterns from the data and the initial noting from above. Maxwell (2005) noted that this coding is often considered the categorizing process within qualitative research. Smith et al. (2009) emphasized the “I” and the “P” of IPA and
suggest that this is where the interpretation of the researcher begin to take shape. As such, the themes should begin to reflect the original words of the participants, but also the interpretations of the researcher.

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes: This is a process of organization to how the researcher thinks the themes fit together. Maxwell (2005) suggested that this process can begin by organizing the emergent themes into three distinct categories: organizational, substantive, and theoretical. Organizational categories are those intuitive areas that can be established before the interviews and observations commence. Substantive categories tend to be descriptive and provide insight into participants’ beliefs. Theoretical categories tend to place data in more abstract perspectives and are often derived inductively. Smith et al. (2009) suggest the researcher consider abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function when organizing emergent themes to super-ordinate themes.

5. Completing the above process for each participant.

6. Searching for patterns across participants: Smith et al (2009) noted that this is a great time to consider theory in terms of the hermeneutic circle – how the pieces and parts connect to the whole, and vice versa. This realization often involves a degree of analysis and this is achieved by switching between micro and macro levels of analysis between participants.

Maxwell (2005) suggested that what is created is a process of categorizing and then a process of connecting. Both approaches are needed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the data.

**Trustworthiness**

To enhance the study, the researcher took a variety of steps to ensure that there was valid and reliable data collection and data analysis. Smith (2010) suggested that doing good IPA research requires a set of complex skills in interviewing, analysis, interpretation, and writing. Pringle et al. (2011) noted that there are pros and cons to both the insider and outsider perspectives when engaging in research with a particular population. While the researcher is an educator and has worked with the site school district on a variety of projects, the researcher does not know any of the APP graduates, nor has the researcher worked professionally within a district school or served as a building principal. Although the researcher was considered an outsider, the researcher did possess many presumptions about the study given his ties to the
education field and his close-working relationship with the BUPS community and schools for over a decade. To overcome these concerns to trustworthiness, it was suggested that the researcher engage in self-reflection, outsider verification, and member-checking (Pringle, Hendry, et al., 2011).

The researcher audio recorded and transcribed all interviews. Utilizing reflexivity supported the researcher in avoiding preconceptions. As the researcher attempted to determine what was objective and what was subjective, a reductive focus was utilized along with a reflective self-awareness (Pringle, Hendry, et al., 2011). The researcher created a table of superordinate and subordinate themes for each research participant. Maintaining an inductive approach, the researcher identified relevant themes across all data sources. Data transcriptions were validated by the research participants for assurances of first-level interpretation. While the second-level interpretations of the researcher are unable to be replicated seamlessly (Smith, 2010), the researcher did maintain an audit-ready study that would allow others to follow an analytic trail from transcript to final write-up. In a commitment to transparency and plausibility (Smith, 2010), the researcher ensured that each theme is supported by extracts from at least half of the research participants (Smith, 2011). To maintain a heightened level of rigor, the researcher also ensured that the analysis highlighted both the convergence and divergence of themes across participants.

Limitations and Delimitations

The primary limitation of the study was the limited pool of potential research participants. The conditions of the study required that all participants “graduated” from the Aspiring Principals Program (APP) and be hired on by the district as a principal or assistant principal. Given the initial cohort size of ten Aspiring Principals and the subsequent dismissal of
two of the Aspiring Principals, the pool of potential participants was effectively eight. While an IPA case study can be completed with as little as one research participant, a participant cohort size between five and nine provides the opportunity to uncover varying realities of an experienced phenomenon that may lead to greater theory development of said phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

A delimitation of the study was the researcher’s decision not to engage with APP candidates that had been dismissed by the program. While each of the non-participating study participants would have undoubtedly offered insights and realities different from those that graduated from the program and were hired on by the district, the researcher purposefully identified participants who had officially completed the APP experience. Aspiring graduate hires were essentially deemed leaders of school reform by virtue of their completion of the experience. While much can be said of the current liminal state of the Aspiring graduates, the non-completers are presumptively still within their liminal states of being, or have very likely reverted back to their “old” selves. Although great insight can be garnered from such individuals, that was not the intent of this study. The research procedures being utilized within the study allowed the researcher to thoroughly engage with each participant regarding their liminal progression. It was at this point that the researcher was able to interpret the participants’ interpretations of how their experiences within each phase of their liminal journeys impacted how they understood and made sense of who they became as leaders of school reform.

**Summary**

This research study explored how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program (APP) in the Buckeye Urban Public School District came to understand and make sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader. Using liminality as a theoretical framework to view the
study and the research participants’ transitions, the researcher conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the participants’ transitions to move towards a model of how the graduates of the inaugural cohort of the APP understood and made sense of their transitions into the role of school reformer leader. Use of IPA allowed for an approach that was phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic.

Participants were purposefully selected based on their graduating from the APP and their subsequent employment by the district as a leader of school reform serving as either a building principal or assistant principal. The researcher collected data from semi-structured interviews, researcher reflection and journaling, and optional written responses from each research participant. The researcher continued the study with an inductive process of identifying emergent themes and then super-ordinate themes for each individual participant, and then for the participant group as a whole. The researcher committed to a high standard of transparency and plausibility by backing each identified theme with extracts from at least half of the research participants.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program (APP) in the Buckeye Urban Public School District (BUPSD) came to understand and make sense of their transitions into the role of school-reform leader. The inaugural cohort (2014-2015) of the APP consisted of 10 “Aspiring Principals.” Eight of the ten successfully graduated from the program. Of those eight graduates, seven agreed to participate in the study and will hereinafter be referred to by the following pseudonyms:

- Aspiring 1
- Aspiring 2
- Aspiring 3
- Aspiring 4
- Aspiring 5
- Aspiring 6
- Aspiring 7

All seven participants completed an in-person interview. Aspiring 2 also provided the optional written statement about his experience transitioning into the role of a school-reform leader.

The rest of this chapter is broken into three sections: the first provides descriptive backgrounds for each of the seven study participants and provides the social context that existed prior to the participants’ involvement within the APP; the second provides a thematic overview and analysis of the four identified superordinate themes generated during the data analysis process, each of which were constructed by subordinate themes representative of at least four of the seven study participants (see Table 2 for an overview of the superordinate and subordinate themes, identified by participant, that were generated throughout the data analysis process); the third provides a conclusion of the study’s findings and specifically addresses how the convergence and divergence of themes impacted the participant experience.
Table 2

*Superordinate and Subordinate Themes Outlined by Participant*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Asp 1</th>
<th>Asp 2</th>
<th>Asp 3</th>
<th>Asp 4</th>
<th>Asp 5</th>
<th>Asp 6</th>
<th>Asp 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superordinate theme 1: Developing belief in the system of change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Awareness of purpose through buying-in to the legislation-driven reform</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Resilience through a reliance on other Aspirings</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Transcendence of self-preservation through altruistic beliefs and behaviors</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superordinate theme 2: Perseverance through meeting difficult messaging head-on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Confidence in their own leadership through the use of data-derived decision making</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Understanding of organizational culture and climate through decoding district impediments to reform</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.3 Compulsion to bear the brunt of external pressures negatively impacting reform</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Superordinate theme 3: Progression towards self-actualization through self-reflection</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3.1 Awakening of an innate aptitude for leadership through making meaning from mentoring</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Developing self-confidence through a developing belief in their own future success</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Ownership of the reform agenda through developing a trailblazing leadership mentality</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>Asp 1</td>
<td>Asp 2</td>
<td>Asp 3</td>
<td>Asp 4</td>
<td>Asp 5</td>
<td>Asp 6</td>
<td>Asp 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superordinate theme 4: Awareness of organizational opportunity through the use of personal reflexivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.1 Emergence of an empathetic leadership style through a developing affinity for others</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Awareness of their own leadership capacity through a critical understanding of the reform-driven principalship</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Sense of comfort through retreating to an “Aspiring” mindset</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Y” (Yes) means that the associated subordinate (and the related superordinate) theme was linked to the corresponding research participant during the data analysis process.

**Participant Backgrounds**

Aspiring 1 is a 29-year-old white female who described her ethnic background as half-Lebanese and half-Irish and German. Aspiring 1 noted that her Lebanese culture was a big part of her life, and that her family and community are very important to her. She further noted that, “A lot of how I operate as a leader stems from some of those experiences culturally.” Aspiring 1 described her socio-economic status growing up as affluent, and noted that she grew up in an affluent suburb west of the BUPSD. She attended private-Catholic schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade. She further described how her Catholic-school experience had a lot to do with her career path: “The work that I do and the idea of going into a service-based field, one where you are helping other people, is also stemming from some of that religious background.” Her parents, from poor backgrounds, achieved academic success in their own rights—her dad became an oral surgeon and her mom became an ER nurse. Aspiring 1 stated that her family life led her to have “pretty much every opportunity one could want as a kid.”

Aspiring 1 commented that college was not optional in her family. She noted that, while her upbringing groomed her to attend a Catholic college, she ended up attending a state
university in Ohio. Though the state university was a different environment for her, particularly in its diversity of students, she loved the experience and found the college’s strong sense of community stimulating. Aspiring 1 noted that she made the decision in her junior year to study education. She described that she had a cousin growing up who was special needs, and that it was her time working with this cousin, and seeing how special-needs children live, that inspired her to pursue special education.

Aspiring 1 spoke very passionately of two study-abroad trips to South Africa and Italy she took during her college tenure. She noted how she grew up in a “cookie-cutter education setting where everybody was kind of the same.” Despite not being aware of any racially- or culturally-insensitive behaviors growing up, the study abroad experiences provided her with exposure to “cultural differences, cultural backgrounds, human interactions, and sociology as a whole.”

Upon her college graduation, Aspiring 1 applied to a variety of special-education teaching positions across several school districts, including both the BUPSD and districts out of state. She was ultimately hired in the BUPSD less than a week before the start of school. Of her “terrible” first teaching experience, she stated, “I absolutely hated it and I told my parents that I was going to go back to pursue another degree.” Aspiring 1 went on to describe how she hated her first teaching experience because of her principal. She said the first thing that her principal said when she looked at her was, “‘They dropped you off on the East Side and thought you would do well at this?  Ha, good luck!’” Aspiring 1 noted that she taught at this K-8 school, despite being hired for high school— her ideal setting—for two years.

Aspiring 1 spoke of how, in the beginning, she thought she was going to be a teacher for the duration of the career. She noted that it was around her third year of teaching that she became
quite confident in her teaching ability and began to think that she “could do way better than my boss.” She then pursued a master’s degree in education administration. She began to think about educators who may be less resilient than herself and would probably quit if they had similar experiences to hers. She thought hard about how she would treat employees differently, and how she could “make this better.” Halfway through her master’s program she got a teaching job at a BUPSD high school, a teaching opportunity that she longed for.

Aspiring 1 began to contemplate her next move, which including pursuing a doctorate and a principalship. Despite some opportunities to leave BUPSD for the suburbs, Aspiring 1 began to realize her commitment to BUPSD. Around this time, Aspiring 1 applied to the APP, as well as to both a principal and assistant-principal position within the BUPSD. Aspiring 1 was offered two positions: one in the APP, and a principal position within a K-8 school. To improve her chances of landing a high-school principalship, she accepted the APP opportunity. Aspiring 1 currently serves as principal of a low-performing (“Choose Your School,” 2016), K-8 STEM School on the city’s near-west side.

Aspiring 2

Aspiring 2 is a 45-year-old Caucasian male, who described his ethnic background as European and Native American. Aspiring 2 noted that he was born in a middle-class city approximately 30 miles west of the BUPSD, and grew up within a lower-middle income household. His family moved to Chesapeake, Virginia after he finished the sixth grade. Aspiring 2 stated that, by the time he was 18 years old, his parents moved to a higher middle-class socio-economic status. He moved back to the BUPSD community 26 years ago as an adult.

Aspiring 2 recalled that he had been “disinterested” throughout his grade-school experience. He noted that he probably graduated with a 2.5 GPA, and that “if there had been
ADHD in the 1970s and 80s, I would have been categorized.” Aspiring 2 attended college at a mid-sized private university about 70 miles southeast of the BUPSD, where he said he finally “bloomed.” Aspiring 2 obtained a degree in special education. He noted that his motivation for pursuing special education goes back to his high school days, when he worked for the Special Olympics through his sophomore, junior, and senior years.

Aspiring 2 described himself as “a two-career person.” After teaching in a suburb approximately 30 miles southeast of the BUPSD community for eight years, he returned to school and obtained a nursing degree. He worked as a PRN (per diem nurse) at a hospital within the BUPSD community for five years, where he was closer to home and could spend time with his children. Aspiring 2 then obtained a master’s degree in education and taught for an additional three years in the suburbs before applying to the APP. He noted that he still holds an active nursing license and works as a PRN. Aspiring 2 currently serves in a principal position of a mid-performing (“Choose Your School,” 2016), K-8 school on the city’s west side.

Aspiring 3

Aspiring 3 is a 35-year-old white female who described her southern-Ohio and Kentucky roots as “very Caucasian.” Aspiring 3 described her socio-economic status in the following way: “My mother was below the poverty line and my dad was a blue collar mechanic.” She describes her education as a child as “inconsistent.” She noted that her parents were divorced, and that she tended to learn the most in school from those who cared about her. She noted that this way of learning, for her, “was consistent all the way through.” She wholeheartedly believed that her educational background is the “whole purpose” and the “whole reason” why she is the educator she is today.
Aspiring 3 attended college at a highly-selective private college in the BUPSD community. After starting college as a biomedical-engineering student, she eventually graduated with a dual major in psychology and sociology. Upon graduation, she joined AmeriCorps. Her AmeriCorps experience allowed her the opportunity to work within a recreation center on the east side of the BUPSD community. After her AmeriCorps experience, Aspiring 3 completed a one-year masters of education program in teaching at a private suburban college east of the BUPSD community. Her first position was a preschool director at a Catholic school in a western suburb of the BUPSD community. After teaching several grades at another Catholic school on the city’s west side, Aspiring 3 moved with her husband to Virginia, where she landed a job teaching in the Alexandria public schools. She then left the public schools and taught in the “highest economic-status school in Alexandria” for about a year before coming back to the BUPSD community to rejoin the Catholic school on the city’s west side where she had previously taught. About a year and a half later she decided to apply for the APP. Aspiring 3 currently serves in an assistant-principal position at the low-performing K-8 STEM school where Aspiring 1 serves as the principal. Aspiring 3 did note that her decision to accept an assistant-principal position was personal, and not a matter of her inability to do the job. Her decision centered specifically on her becoming a new mom and her desire to have more time with her family, as she understood the demands and high expectations of the principalship. She commented, “I feel like I'm in the right place for where I am now.”

Aspiring 4

Aspiring 4 is a 33-year-old white female, who described her ethnic background as German-Irish. Aspiring 4 grew up in a “comfortable…upper middle” household in the suburbs east of the BUPSD community. She described her K-12 experiences as “very traditional,” with a
mix of experiences in public and private settings, beginning in private Montessori, then private Catholic, then public, and then back to private Catholic. She noted that she “had solidly mediocre teachers all the way through K-12.”

Aspiring 4 joined the Peace Corps upon completing her undergraduate degree, then obtained a master’s degree in anthropology, and finally obtained a job in NYC with a global health consulting firm focusing on women’s health. She tired quickly of that job, and entered the NYC Teaching Fellows Program (NYCTFP), a non-traditional teacher-preparation program similar to Teach for America. The NYCTFP provides individuals the opportunity to teach in an “urban…high-need school” for two years while they work on their master’s degree in education. After completing the NYCTFP, Aspiring 4 moved back to the BUPSD community and took a position as a special-education teacher with a charter school. She served as the Special Education Coordinator and Director of Curriculum at the charter school before applying to the APP. Aspiring 4 currently serves in a principal position of a mid-performing ("Choose Your School," 2016), K-8 school on the city’s far east side.

Aspiring 5

Aspiring 5 is a 38-year-old Caucasian female who described her ethnic background as 100% Ukrainian. Aspiring 5 grew up in a lower-middle class household in Maplewood, NJ and in the fourth grade moved to a middle-income suburb just west of the BUPSD community. She noted that, during her K-12 education, she was “educated on Saturdays in the Ukrainian language.” After graduating high school, she attended a private university approximately 60 miles southeast of the BUPSD community. Aspiring 5 majored in elementary education and minored in psychology, and went on to earn an online master’s degree in information science and
computer technologies. In addition to her teaching licensure, she is also a certified Media Specialist.

Aspiring 5’s entire work history has been within the BUPSD. She was hired the summer after she finished her undergraduate degree, and started off as a kindergarten teacher, and then was switched to a first grade class before being laid off, only to later be re-hired by the district as an eighth-grade teacher. She then transferred into a media specialist role, working at a few different buildings—this served as the impetus for her obtaining the master’s degree in information science. Aspiring 5 then enrolled in the APP and a traditional principal-licensure program at a public university located in the BUPSD. Although she did not need a principal licensure to complete the APP, she felt it would benefit her, as she would need to obtain her principal licensure at some point. She finished both the APP and the traditional licensure program in the same month.

She went on to describe how the traditional program “felt like I was going through the motions in order to get the license.” When asked about being prepared for the principalship without the Aspiring program, she explained: “I definitely would not have been prepared. I would have understood maybe the technical understandings of being a principal, but not the actual work it takes.” Aspiring 5 currently serves in a principal position at a low-performing ("Choose Your School," 2016), K-8 school on the city’s east side.

Aspiring 6

Aspiring 6 is a 27-year-old white female who described her ethnic background as white. She noted that her father’s family is “extremely diverse.” Her father’s parents were orphans, so she does not truly know of their heritage. She explained she “took my ethnic identity from my mom’s side.” Aspiring 6 grew up in “an extremely low income neighborhood” of Topeka, KS
until about the age of five. She noted that her parents moved past the suburbs to the country
when she started school. Aspiring 6 said that, growing up, she “was under the impression that I
was middle class,” but she noted that, as she learned more about socio-economic class and
experiences, she realized she “may have been on the upper-end of low income.” She further
noted that she was “born two blocks down from the lowest-performing school in Topeka.” She
said her education was her parents’ sole motivation for moving to the country. She recalled her
house being broken into three or four times by the time she was five years old. She further
commented,

    I have a memory of someone coming out of our house as we were pulling into the
driveway and my dad chasing them and jumping fences. So that is what it was like from
zero to five…but that experience drastically changed when we moved.

She attended a few months of daycare or preschool, and then attended the same public
school from kindergarten to sixth grade. She then moved on to the public middle school and high
school. She noted that she was a stellar student, obtaining marks near 4.0 and achieving grades
within the top 10% of the class. As a result of her high marks, she was able to attend Kansas
State University on scholarship, where she was pre-med in public health and ultimately
completed a dual-major in social science and international studies. Her interest in education,
however, began to develop when she was an ESL tutor at the local middle schools during her
first years of college. She also became an AVID tutor. Aspiring 6 noted that she applied for
Teach for America in her senior year, but did not make it through. She went on to describe how
she “put all of the med school and public health school on hold to the dismay of my parents,” and
moved to San Antonio, TX to obtain an alternative certification and continue working with a
high-ELL population. She was hired to teach in a San Antonio high school one week after she
completed her alternative certification.
Aspiring 6 taught science courses in grades 9-12. In her last year, she became a STEM Magnet Coordinator. It was about this time when she read about the reform efforts taking place in the BUPSD, and she found out about the APP and decided to apply. Aspiring 6 currently serves in a principal position at a new Information Technology high school on the city’s far-west side.

Aspiring 7

Aspiring 7 is a 36-year-old black male who described his ethnic background as African-American. Aspiring 7 grew up in rural South Carolina, and he described his socio-economic background as “poor working class.” He commented that his family “didn’t have a lot of money growing up, but my parents both worked and we had what we needed.” He noted that his parents “pushed education.” He commented that “it was one of the requirements to live in the household.” As a result, he was “very academically-focused as a child.”

Aspiring 7 described himself as “a pretty well-rounded student” in high school. He played a variety of sports and participated in various leadership and development organizations. He attended South Carolina State University for undergrad where he majored in technology education. He completed a master’s degree in education immediately after his bachelor’s degree, also at South Carolina State University. A few years later, he completed an education-specialist degree at Nova Southeastern. He is currently working on his doctorate in educational leadership at North Central University. He noted that, “my whole career has been in education…this is year fourteen for me.”

Aspiring 7 said he’s “run the gamut” in terms of experiences in his education career. He noted that he has “been in suburban settings, rural settings, and…now urban settings here in [BUPSD].” Although this is his first year as a principal, he did serve a few years in
administration prior to entering into the APP last year. He served as an assistant principal in North Carolina, and before that he served as a technology coordinator at a middle school in Georgia. Aspiring 7 said that is was a mixture of the APP and his wife needing the support of her family for their new born child that encouraged him and his family to move to the BUPSD community. Aspiring 7 currently serves in a principal position at a new Engineering high school on the city’s far-west side.

**Analysis of Themes**

The data-analysis process led to the identification of 12 common themes that stemmed from the experiences of the seven study participants. Each theme represented at least four of the seven participants. Seven of the twelve themes were representative of all study participants. The 12 themes were then categorized into groupings of similarity, and this process resulted in the development of four superordinate themes. Each of the four superordinate themes were supported by three common (subordinate) themes. Each of the superordinate and subordinate findings are described below.

**Developing Belief in the System of Change**

The first superordinate theme to emerge from the data concerned the participants’ developing beliefs that the system of change (the reform agenda before them) was the appropriate path towards realizing success within the BUPSD. Participants themselves often endured grueling circumstances during their transitions into the school reform-leader role. In order to make headway in the volatile reform-driven environment, participants began to experience a growing belief in the system itself, and they often exhibited this confidence in the system through their buying-in to the reform agenda for the district, relying on one another for support, and through putting the best interests of others before their own.
Participants often spoke of how their resolve was tested, both mentally and physically, during their training to become school-reform leaders. The conditions of the program were such that the meaning and purpose behind tasks were not always clear. There were also heavy workloads expected to be completed in short timeframes. Aspiring 1 commented that she “was miserable” during the process. She further commented that she once wrote a review of the program, where she noted, “If you brought in a psychologist, they would say all of the candidates were clinically depressed.” Other Aspirings commonly described the experience as intense and overwhelming due to all that was expected of them. Aspiring 2 said,

The Aspiring Principals Program was, at times, overwhelming. I think what they were looking for when they hired us was whether those seeds could be planted and we were receptive. I think the people who made it through, because not everybody got through their program, the people who made it through were all of that mindset.

Aspiring 2, who entered the program with no administrative training or experience, noted also the challenge of needing to be critical of his own leadership abilities. He struggled with understanding the need to be so self-critical in the process of becoming a leader of school reform. He said, “It was difficult because of the heavy amount of self-reflection.” It was later in the process that he made the realization that “being real open to being a leader and my decisions and what I could do better” was the purpose of what he and his colleagues were going through. Aspiring 5 shared a similar perspective, noting that the experience was “exhausting. It was a lot of hard work. It broke us down; it broke me down often.” Aspiring 5 went on to note how she grew from the experience of being broke down. She stated, “In the end, it made me a resilient leader.”

Both of these accounts illustrated how the preparations were intense, yet purposeful. As the participants initially questioned their decisions to join the program, they slowly made sense of their experiences and began to see the value of their involvement in shaping their identities as
leaders of reform. Currently serving in the school reform leader role, Aspiring 6 said that when she thinks back on the “little principal boot camp,” she now understands that “they were really getting us ready in every way as intense as possible for what was coming.” Aspiring 3 spoke of the feeling of being “knocked down, kicked in the teeth, punched in the gut” as a way for the Aspirings to “be at that same rock bottom level to start moving up quickly.”

**Awareness of purpose through buying-in to the legislation-driven reform.** A part of the Aspiring’s sense of purpose in this work derived from their buying-in to the legislation-driven reform. The APP was rooted in the district’s reform agenda, and the participants had to accept the reform methodology as a means to establish themselves as leaders within this work. As a result, participants set out to forge ahead with a focus on reform. The participants were literally indoctrinated with the reform plan. Aspiring 1 noted,

> The training was 100% surrounding the [reform] plan. It's pretty simple when you break it down. We'll do whatever it takes to move our buildings forward. Right now we think that that needs to be done by getting rid of the dead weight. That was the focus. Teacher evaluations, how to appropriately evaluate, being data driven in your instruction, being data driven in your decision making process as a leader.

Aspiring 1 offered that she had completely bought-in to the reform plan. A big part of her buy-in derived from the fundamental message of the reform agenda, which, as she stated, was simply, “to be better.” Aspiring 1 went on to discuss how she relied on the reform plan in all that she does as a leader of school reform. Of her teachers, she stated, “I will say they know everything that I do is aligned to the plan and I will cite that 100% of the time. I took the document as like a living document, something I live, eat, and breathe.”

Similarly, Aspiring 5 commented on how the reform plan became a part of her daily life. She stated,

> Because we lived it. We in the Aspiring Principal's Program discussed the plan. Understood it, studied it, prepared ourselves to understand it when we applied for the
Aspiring 1 similarly noted how the reform plan was central to the experience, and even to acceptance into the program. She stated, “the whole process getting in to it was to basically prove your allegiance to education reform.” Part of that belief in reform was to recognize the personal value in it and to stick with it to the end. Aspiring 7 spoke of his understanding of the reform plan and of his ability to recognize what it was trying to accomplish, stating, “the work is important. I feel like the work that I'm doing right now is very important. I understand the plan. I see the focus of it. I see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

**Resilience through a reliance on other Aspirings.** The Aspirings’ conviction to accept the reform plan as essential to their own path to success was undeniable. The reform agenda within the district was often a breeding ground for contention within the district. Given the alienation that comes with trying to be a new and non-traditional leader, the participants often relied on support and guidance from one another to make it through the confusion and disorder. Their shared faith in the reform plan and their resiliency through challenges bred an unwavering sense of comradery between them. As a result, their connection with the overall system of change came through as a strong contributing factor regarding their growing belief in the system of change.

Part of that reliance was formed out of the structure of the program. Aspiring 5 noted, “It was a very public learning experience for the group of us. We knew what each other's areas of growth were, and it was discussed openly.” The other part of that reliance was forged from the passion that each Aspiring held for the reform work that they were doing. Aspiring 3 stated, I felt like there's bubbles of committed reformers. As far as the other Aspiring Principals, I would say one of the things that bound us together right away was that we really all care about kids. I would say everybody who finished the program really cares about kids and
that's what they're here for. It’s never a question. We all may have different views on how
to get there, but our hearts are all together. When we were out of that bubble. I would say
it's very inconsistent within [the BUPSD community].

Aspiring 6 suggested that she would not be the reform leader she is today if it were not
for the support of Aspiring 3. She explained,

There are specific people in the program that...I know I would have been able to make it
through...I can say I'm the type of person that would have pushed through no matter what,
but I would have not come out on the other side in such a positive state if certain
individuals had not been along my side.

Aspiring 6’s description of her relationship with Aspiring 3 was so significant that she referred to
her as her “safety blanket” in the program. Aspiring 6 further noted that,

When [Aspiring 3] went out for maternity leave, it was sink or swim for me. It was good
for me, it pushed me faster than anything had before and that had nothing to do with the
program...She had a strong belief in me, personally. When she left, there was no one else
who I felt that from, and so then it was like, ‘Okay, well, you got to believe in yourself
now.’ I did and we move forward and I'm fine.

Aspiring 7, the only Aspiring with previous administrative experience, spoke about how
he would often have to intervene when others would begin to “crack under the pressure.” He,
similarly to Aspiring 1, stated,

One of the things I used to tell, and a lot of the Aspirings actually, like I said, being that I
was one of the people that had that AP experience prior to, assistant principal, I used to
always say, ‘Think of this as a pledge process. Everything you're doing right now is all a
simulation.’ You're not actually the school leader right now, but the program is so intense
a lot of times they were cracking. They were starting to crack under the pressure. In
several instances, several of them would go outside and it was instances where you had
to, ‘Hey, look. Think about it. This is school. This is almost like school. It's not real yet.
Next year it's going to be real.’

Due to his maturity within the administrative role, Aspiring 7 was often able to be the voice of
reason to his Aspiring colleagues. He strongly believed that his past administrative experience is
what allowed him to be a calming voice that could see the program for what it was intended to
be—a transformative process with intentionally crafted characteristics and purposefully positioned milestones.

While some of the Aspirings suggested that their communication with each other has waned since leaving the APP, due to their current workloads, they also revealed the importance of themselves continuing to support one another. Aspiring 1 and Aspiring 3 serve as principal and assistant principal for the same school, and Aspiring 6 and Aspiring 7 serve as principals of two individual small schools within one larger building. These four Aspirings spoke of the benefits of working in close proximity of another Aspiring as opposed to working on their own. Aspiring 3 noted,

"I think it's been pure…. I can't think of anything other than beneficial to have to be able to work with Aspiring 1. Since both of us have already been through the process of learning to accept feedback, it wasn't something we had to work through together. We both are aware of current research. We both know about how to progress monitor a school, we know how to take action steps. When it's our leadership time or leadership meetings even, within that context we don't have to spend as much time trying to build up to why we're doing something. We both know the why and then it's been better to bounce ideas off each other for a problem to approach the staff to get buy-in from them too because while we both have been through that process, they haven't been and we need to lead them through change.

While they are not officially supporting one another within the same school building, Aspiring 6 noted the following when she spoke of her relationship with Aspiring 7:

"I'm just blessed to have that opportunity because I know that Aspiring 3 and Aspiring 1 have it, and Aspiring 7 and I have it. Everyone else is completely solo. I say that, not because they don't have strong team members surrounding them, but they don't have a partner who went through the same experiences. Nothing can compare to that.

Aspiring 6 added, “I definitely would say that that has helped me to continue pushing and continue growing and just have that thought partner. Just knowing that we have each other's back no matter what, through whatever comes up. Yeah, that's a very strong part.” As many of the participants spoke of struggles with reform within their respective buildings, there were not
many within the district who approached the work in a similar fashion to the Aspiring graduates, and that has definitely strengthened their collective belief in the system of change.

**Transcendence of self-preservation through altruistic beliefs and behaviors.** Most of the participants spoke of their confidence in leading reform and how they had to look beyond their own self-interests if they were to be successful in creating opportunity for others. Within the work, the individual growth and development of others were often their underlying goals. The participants’ engagement with the reform was not about themselves, but about the betterment of those around them—the students that they served and the adults that they lead.

The Aspirings spoke of their willingness to take risks within the district and of the level of ownership that they felt over their buildings. They all knew that the change that they hoped to see in the district was going to start with them. Aspiring 2 noted that “there’s a mentality shift within the district that has to take place and it has to start with the building principals.” The Aspirings were well aware of their responsibility, and they came to appreciate their grueling training. They had been not only prepared to be school reformers, but to be district reformers, as well.

Aspiring 6 spoke of herself as a “fulcrum for change” within the district. She was also aware that they were just the beginning. Her Aspiring colleagues were the first cohort. There would be future cohorts behind them to support the cause and this was reason to look past their own self-interests. She stated,

> Not only that, but leading that change, knowing that there would be Aspirings coming after us and we needed to really start the momentum and sustain that momentum. We knew that we are the pioneers in that, we were the guinea pigs. Whatever would come, we would have to find a way through it because there would be others following in our path.
The passion that she exhibited spoke volumes to her dedication to the reform agenda. Aspiring 7 spoke further about his commitment to the district and his willingness to support the district in leadership development programs for black males and through supporting external recruitment efforts for talent. He stated,

"I wouldn't mind being a person to go and help recruit talent for the district and letting them know that it is a good district to work for and it's not what you may have heard in the past about [BUPSD]. It's a vision. We're moving in the right direction."

Despite serving in the demanding role of a leader of school reform, and having a young family of his own, Aspiring 7 was committed to creating an academic environment for all of the district’s students that would provide them the best opportunity for success.

The Aspirings also spoke of their commitment to serving as residency-year mentors for future Aspiring cohorts. Aspiring 1 spoke of her and Aspiring 5 already going beyond their expected duties to give back to the second cohort of Aspirings. Aspiring 1 described how she and Aspiring 5 met with the new Aspirings and provided them with honest descriptions of the work, but also words of encouragement. Aspiring 1 also spoke of her reluctance to divulge too much about what was in store for them, as she was concerned that part of the growth was in the struggle. She noted,

"I try to let them go through their own process too, I don't really want to be overbearing and be like, ‘you should do this or you should do that.’ I wouldn't want to take away the growing piece of that program for any of them."

As Aspiring 1 made sense of her own experience, she began to see how she could play a role in the development and growth of others. If she made the process too easy for future Aspirings, they might not fully develop into leaders of school reform. In particular, they may not develop a dedication to the reform, or learn to rely on other Aspirings for support. In addition, they may
not learn to look beyond their own self-interest when they assume the principalship. Aspiring 5 supported the latter claim when she poignantly stated,

If the students don't learn, and the teachers don't teach, we are failing these children. If we are failing them, then we're ruining their lives, and that's the root of everything I believe. That we have to be the change, we have to do whatever we need to do to make sure that they achieve so that they can be successful in their lives, and if not, we are setting them up for failure as adults. That's my basis for why I do this.

**Perseverance Through Meeting Difficult Messaging Head-On**

The second superordinate theme to emerge from the data concerned the participants persevering through challenges brought on by difficult messaging sounding the reform plan. The Aspirings often faced uncertainty in their identities as leaders, given that they were non-classically trained school leaders in a classical environment. They also faced significant external pressures to realize the goals of the reform, including threats to their professional careers. They were forced to meet these challenges head-on if they were to see their reform efforts actualized.

Aspiring 6, a transplant from Texas, noted, “I think that coming in to the district, not having known about the history of the district and only having heard in wanting to be a part of the [reform] plan, I did not realize it was such a volatile situation.” The participants all had to overcome roadblocks that stood before them along their respective journeys, become more skilled at decoding the various district-level impediments of the reform, and navigate the various external pressures placed upon them to realize the intended outcomes of the reform plan.

**Confidence in their own leadership through the use of data-derived decision making.** With such strong rhetoric for and against the reform effort within the district, true change was a concept that had to be met with straight-to-the-point feedback. Participants developed a common vernacular for this type of feedback and decision-making: *low-inference*, which involves a focus on data and on removing all emotional ties to the work. This concept was
highly revered by the participants, as their positions regularly required them to make decisions in their buildings that often went against the opinions of their colleagues, especially those against reform. This technique built a level of leadership confidence that had not existed within the participants prior to their Aspiring experience.

When Aspiring 5 talked about herself as a leader who had successfully developed the art of low-inference decision making, she said, “I think that it's also making us better evaluators because when we're doing our [teacher evaluations], there's no…it's not judgment to it—it's collecting evidence.” She further noted that, “It's based on something actual and accurate. It removes that personal opinion component. At least you know that what you're being asked to do, or an observation that was made was based on something that was true.”

The relevance of this stems partly from, as Aspiring 3 recounted, the fact that many teachers are working hard, but are not utilizing best practices to bring about results. She noted, I just didn’t realize how many people are off about like understanding our kids, but also how many techniques are really outdated. You know what I mean and to try and convince them being something that they’ve done for 30 years it’s not research based and it doesn’t work. To them it’s what they were trained was right.

Aspiring 1 provided similar insight, noting that the purpose of the approach was to reject thinking in terms of “good or bad”, and support thinking in terms of “effective or ineffective”. She further noted her ability to provide non-judgmental feedback to her staff was potentially harsh on the recipient, but was ultimately a skill that school leaders needed to perfect if they were going to bring about true reform. She commented, If I’m evaluating you as a teacher and it was a crap lesson, being able to use non-judgmental information to tell you why your rating wasn't effective. Instead of saying, ‘I really appreciate that you do X, Y and Z, but in your lesson these things happened,” it's very much like, ‘you said this, point to me on the rubric how this aligns.'
Developing thick skin and an openness to receiving criticism, however, took time for the Aspirings. The participants often cringed when recalling their own feedback sessions. Their ability to absorb criticism and not let it affect their actions was important in their ability to lead with conviction. When Aspiring 2 recounted a time he encountered a disgruntled staff, he stated, “I never got angry. I didn't take it personally. I couldn't have done that without the Aspiring program. I would have gotten very stressed.” The public learning experience between the Aspirings also helped them develop this ability. Aspiring 4 explained how “each Aspiring’s areas of weakness were made public, and you would receive constant feedback on it until you improved upon it.” Aspiring 3 spoke of failure in the process and how efforts in the reform were not always going to work, especially things initiated at the school-building level; however, she explained how she now has the ability see her way through her failures. She commented,

Like, I almost just laughed about it and it’s not funny, but like I’m not going to give up. It didn’t work; it’s not always going to work. Sometimes things like backfire hugely, but you figure out a different plan and you move forward.

The participants also spoke of the isolation that comes with serving in a reform-driven leadership role, noting the minimal praise when things go well, and the excess of criticism when things go wrong. Aspiring 1 stated,

I feel like one thing that I would have really been struggling with had I not been in the program is worrying about whether or not I'm doing a good job or getting feedback and not really knowing or getting feedback and being offended by it. I am at a point right now 100% because of the program where you could come in as my boss or as my employee, either way and tell me [Aspiring 1] this is completely ineffective, it's not working. Here is why and instead of saying, what do you mean it's not working, I did X, Y and Z. It's okay, let's look at data. Let's look at why—what's our next move? We are not going to continue a practice that does not work. I was always a very assertive person but I think this has made me cutthroat. I am on that data; I am ready for whatever comes at me. I'm not afraid of the failure. Fine it failed, boom, let's move on. Let's not dwell on this. Let's not internalize this. Let's fix it. Something that may not happened prior to that.
Understanding of organizational culture and climate through decoding district impediments to reform. Participants continuously faced pressure to abandon the reform agenda from a variety of sources: culture clashes between the pro-reformers and the non-reformers, confusion in the district regarding who the Aspirings were, mixed messaging concerning the reform agenda, and union impediments to the reform movement. All of the participants spoke in great detail about dealing with an “old” culture in the district and within their buildings that made implementing the reform difficult. Part of their challenge, especially those not native to the BUPSD community, was deriving meaning from the long-held opinions and beliefs of others in the district. The participants then had to determine how to best navigate those beliefs in order to make headway with the reform. The participants realized that these deeply-rooted and pervasive beliefs were multifaceted and often multi-dimensional, depending on where and how they came across the feedback.

Criticism from those cynical of the reform plan concerned the long history of unsuccessful attempts at reform year after year within the BUPSD. Aspiring 2 spoke of a dichotomy that he felt existed within the district. He commented,

> Within the Aspiring Principals Program and the mentors that I came in contact with…there was an embrace of not only change, but that passion for let's do things right. Then there's also a group of principals and educators that have been here a long time that are very much trying to put a damper on that. Basically trying to diffuse that enthusiasm a little bit. They kind of take that approach, ‘It's the same old. We've seen it before. It's a cycle.’ You hear that a lot. There's two definitely distinctive groups in terms of embracing that change process that has to happen in the city.

Many of the participants described how the loss of faith in reform from so many of the BUPSD staff had significantly decreased commitment to the current reform plan altogether. Aspiring 5 also spoke of her need to be an agent of change within her building to combat the discourse of anti-reform across the district. She recounted that her teachers told her, “We’ve
tried, we’ve tried, we’re going to try this, and we’re going to throw it away in two minutes.” She noted that trying to diffuse the notion that “people don’t really believe any reform will stick at this point” has been a challenge, but it is her job to chip away at that in her building. She went on to note,

It can be really challenging. First of all, because there's a lack of understanding, and a lack of the sense of urgency as a result of it as well. It's really about me as an administrator educating them. Not just educating, but trying to build the trust so that they know that what I'm saying and what the district's trying to do is truthful. Not just that what they're hearing from the union is the accurate information.

A few participants noted how some of the culture clash within the district derived from the impediments intentionally brought forth by the union. The participants voiced their opinions of their union representatives and found their representatives’ engagement with the reform plan to be less than favorable. Aspiring 1 commented, “The union, I will not say it is a completely unfavorable view of reform, as long as it doesn't directly affect how hard [they] have to work.”

For the participants who maintained favorable opinions of their union representatives, there was still an anxiety that the union would challenge the reform simply for the sake of doing so. Aspiring 3 spoke of a scenario in which the teachers agreed to a reform practice she and her administrative team had presented, but the union stepped in anyway. She commented, “I don’t know if the district as a whole right now is all on the same page because you have union leadership pushing in the schools where it’s not even needed necessarily.”

Aspiring 2 commented, “The other thing is the union part…that's been my biggest challenge at this building is learning how to work with a union rep that can be very confrontational sometimes.” Much of that confrontation stemmed from mixed messaging around the reform, which often times led to resistance. Aspiring 1 commented about the mixed messaging within the district, stating,
As a teacher you have the [union] telling you one thing. You have what is actually happening, what you actually have to be worried about. Then you have the district messaging. The last thing to get to you is district messaging. The first two hit you first.

Aspiring 5 also noted how the messaging between administrators and teachers was also potentially different. She commented,

We were very aware of the legislature, and the efforts of the district was just trying to perform put forward to really reform. I'm saying that though as sitting in an administrative role. I don't necessarily know that that was always presented to the staff that way. As leaders, we were really aware of the reform that was going on, and the efforts, and the sincere efforts for reform. I don’t think that was an understanding that the staff necessarily had. Or a belief that they have that [BUPSD] can reform, and is in the process of doing that.

Because of this messaging dilemma, the school leaders were often forced to take responsibility for leading the messaging efforts within their buildings to ensure that their staffs were aware of the reform plan. Aspiring 1 commented on how disconnected her own teachers were with regards to the reform plan, noting, “I would say if you looked at my staff, 80% of them have not read the plan. If I had to guess…. I would venture to say that most of [BUPSD] teachers. I'm making this statistic up, but if I had to guess, most don't.” Aspiring 1 further discussed how she had to make sure her professional development sessions were rooted in the reform plan, and how she had to be explicit with them that the efforts she was taking in the building were extensions of the city-wide reform plan. Despite that, she noted that, “People are not buying-in or caring.”

When staff do buy-in to the reform plan, however, success has occurred. As Aspiring 3 commented, “We have seen some growth with the teachers who really embraced [reform] from the beginning, which was nice with our data to see that. We haven’t seen that same growth with the teachers who've been reluctant.” So the challenge of getting the others on board remains. In his new school, Aspiring 7 noted that his biggest challenges with reform came not from the
students in his school, but rather from “the adults and the relationships in the building actually with adults that’s your biggest issue.”

The participants also spoke of teachers and staff who maybe just did not understand the reform, and who maybe wanted to maintain the status quo because they feared their shortcomings being exposed, and the immense amount of work involved in school reform. They also spoke of those teachers who, despite their poor evaluation scores, felt that they were not the problem after having been told in the past that they were “accomplished,” albeit in a less-rigorous teacher-evaluation system.

The participants appeared cognizant of their own growth and development over the last year and they understood that who they were trying to be was also causing problems because there was great confusion within the district about who the “Aspiring Principals” were. Aspiring 3 noted,

We walked in as new leaders last year. Really, we all walked in schools where nobody really understood what the Aspiring Principals Program was and didn't really know what we were. We didn't really know what we were. It was very ambiguous…made us find a way to identify ourselves and identify what we needed to do, but the focus from the program was always ‘what are you doing to help kids?’

This is where all of the participants tend to lead from. They contend that they are in place to help their students, “scholars” as many of them refer to their students, and this is what drives them to persevere through all of the difficult messaging that has come their way as they have tried to implement the reform agenda.

**Compulsion to bear the brunt of external pressures negatively impacting reform.**

Focusing on the reform while tending to their various responsibilities proved challenging. In addition to internal pressures, the participants often faced high expectations to achieve success from various external reform stakeholders. All of them felt compelled to take ownership of the
effort when it came to representing the face of reform within their buildings. Some even felt compelled to represent the ideals of the reform across the district and throughout the city.

Aspiring 6 spoke of the important role education itself plays in the systemic inequities that exist within the BUPSD community at large. She noted, “There's a lot happening in [the BUPSD community] …just socially, and between race and class, and the [reform agenda]. Everything.” The burden of that pressure weighed a lot on those in charge of reforming the education sector, a sector that was often referred to as a catalyst for change within the greater BUPSD community.

As Aspiring 2 noted, “urban education isn’t failing in areas simply because of poverty, or simply because of any one factor. Its complex.” The complexity of the matter created an external pressure that often manifested as threats to participants’ livelihoods. In discussing a closing conversation the Aspiring graduates had with the district superintendent, Aspiring 1 noted the district’s high expectation of success. She recounted the experience as follows:

[The superintendent] sat us down at that very end of the cohort for a dinner and said, ‘It is my expectation that you will move your buildings, period. You have one year. If you don't move them, you can expect to be fired.’ He made it very clear. He wasn't being mean about it, he was just very matter-of-fact. It is an expectation and you have been trained to do it, so we believe that.

Aspiring 1 further noted how this exchange was not internalized as a threat, but more as a call to action, and described the encounter as a discussion that built her confidence. When Aspiring 7 spoke of his role in his school through a reform lens, he was pretty matter of fact when it came to the expectations that were being placed upon him and his colleagues. He specifically mentioned the leaderships’ expectation that principals’ “progress monitor,” or ensure the fidelity of the instructional practices within their buildings. He noted,
Because basically that's how you keep your job as a principal. Your numbers have to be in line with what they're...or you need to be pushing towards those goals. If you're going the opposite way, then you will be opposite way out of this district as well.

Because the participants understood their task and the consequences of both failure and success, they spoke clearly of the balancing act of learning how to navigate through all of the various task-oriented pressures that were placed upon them on a daily basis. Many spoke of their role as a leader of school reform as one where there is more to do than they could possibly do, so they had to learn to prioritize their agendas, while at the same time improving student achievement. Aspiring 6 commented,

Knowing when to move back and forth throughout the different tasks that you're doing on a daily basis...Knowing how to move back and forth and continue the momentum in the progress moving forward, is one of the biggest things that I learned that I had not previously been able to put into words or been able to put into action prior to the Aspiring Principals Program.

Aspiring 5 noted how her professional transition in the Aspiring program taught her that the “focus has to be on student achievement” if the district was going to realize any change. Aspiring 3 described how her growth during her transition prepared her to persevere through overwhelming situations:

It's not always easy to clear it out and say, ‘What do I need to work on right now for the kids.’ We practiced that so much last year that I think I maybe do that more often than someone who hasn't gone through the training.

Aspiring 3 went on to describe her personal struggle to fight for reform given its often overbearing resistance. She displayed further dissatisfaction for the large amounts of testing and the punitive feeling that the educational system of today places upon educators and students. She noted, “I just feel like that direction of education in general, if it keeps going in that direction, I won’t be able to sustain momentum in that, because it crushes the joy of learning.” Despite her
verbal display of dismay, she is intrinsically tied to the work and compelled to persevere through its limitations.

**Progression Towards Self-Actualization Through Self-Reflection**

The ambiguous, high-stakes, and often high-pressure environment that the participants found themselves in often led them to question themselves and the program. By deriving meaning from their mentoring experiences, developing self-confidence through their own growth and development, leading with a trailblazing mentality, and self-reflecting on their respective journeys, the participants began to self-actualize within their tumultuous surroundings.

**Awakening of an innate aptitude for leadership through making meaning from mentoring.** Mentoring within the Aspiring program was a significant component of all the participants’ transition experiences; however, the quality of their relationships with their mentors, and of their overall mentoring experiences, was by no means equal. The participants spoke at length of the strengths and weaknesses of their mentoring experiences. They also spoke of the other participants’ mentors and how they believed their experiences either helped or hindered their colleagues’ progressions. The cross-references of the mentoring experiences also served as a means to validate the importance the mentoring experience had in each participant’s transition experience. It also further validated the reliance the participants had with one another as they confided in each other about their experiences with their mentoring relationships.

Within the mentoring discussion, which was a formalized component of the program largely reserved for the Aspiring’s residency-site principal, some participants recalled their informal mentoring relationship with the APP Director as an extremely meaningful and valuable mentoring relationship. In addition to the program director, participant mentoring was also informally supported through the mentors of other Aspirings, peer-to-peer relationships between
participants, and other school leader across the district that the participants encountered throughout their respective journeys.

Aspiring 1 recalled the mentoring experience as, “one of those things that could have gone either way.” Some of the participants raved about their mentors and credited them for all of who they were today as leaders of school reform. Aspiring 6 passionately commented, “I was very blessed to have such a great mentor. I don't think that my experience would have been the same without [my mentor]. I probably can't say that enough.” Aspiring 6 noted how her mentor intentionally aligned her mentoring with the ideals of the APP program, which made the experience that much more meaningful. She also noted that, while her mentor was the one who set the highest expectations for her, she was also there to push her and motivate her. Aspiring 6 further commented,

She has higher expectations than anyone I've ever met and she knows how to support people through meeting those expectations without pushing them away or coddling them too much. She has a really, really great balance of pushing people while supporting them at the same time. I think that's what makes her a great mentor. I think that's the missing part between other mentors who maybe didn't push their Aspirings as much or enough even, or who pushed their Aspirings too much. You see both sides, so I think that is exactly what differentiates her.

Whereas Aspiring 6 noted the value of the connection between the mentoring relationship and the teachings of the Aspiring program, Aspiring 5, who actually had two residency-site placements, described her first placement as challenging because her mentor had not fully bought into the philosophies of the Aspiring program. She commented,

I think the placement was an issue. I was told in my first site I was put there specifically because the mentor was completely the opposite of me. Which you can learn a lot from someone that is the opposite of you, but sometimes it also doesn’t lead to the most productive relationship. I don’t want to even say that’s because they weren’t prepared well enough, but I think it’s that their philosophies didn’t align with the philosophy of the program, then that was a challenge
Aspiring 5 further noted how the challenging experience of her first mentoring experience was not without its teachable moments. She explained,

I learned resilience from that first one. I had to go to a school every day where there was questions and confusion about my role. What I could and couldn't do, and I really learned the resilience from dealing with this every day. Where when I went to the other school, I learned much more of the practical application. Because those barriers weren't there anymore.

The ability to find meaning in every experience was indeed valuable to her growth and development.

The initial willingness to divulge information of the mentoring experience was also quite different between the participants, and seemingly related to how they felt about the experience itself. Similarly to Aspiring 6, Aspiring 2 had tremendous success with his mentor, recalling,

I was blessed with a wonderful mentor who put me in positions to learn on my own. He didn't want to hold my hand and tell me what to do, which is what I really... that's what worked best for me. The mentorship placement is the most important part of this program and I was blessed. I had a very good mentor.

Aspiring 2 also described how his positive mentoring experience allowed him to then recognize quality attributes of other leaders across the district that he could also benefit from. He recounted how he chose from whom he sought advice:

In the Aspiring program I had the opportunity early on to listen to principals that I knew had something to offer me. Then, of course, the Aspirings we talked all the time. There are people who didn't love their mentors. If there was a legitimate reason, I didn't seek any help from that person. There are other people like [the mentor of Aspiring 8—the Aspiring graduate who elected to not participate in the study], where his Aspiring just gushed. He had this idea, and this idea. I said, ‘[Aspiring 8’s mentor], let me talk to you.’ Then you realized she was right. This guy has a million great ideas. I think people who want to improve education and it's not just a job, it's something we really want to do, you find each other. I call [my mentor and Aspiring 8’s mentor, and others]. I call those guys all the time still. I need help. What do I do? I'm not afraid to say I don't know, because I don't know a lot.
When he sat with the mentoring idea for a moment, he went on to note,

I believe the absolute most important component of the program is the residency placements…. There were some principals, Aspirings, that did not make it through the program. I'm not saying it's because of their mentors. I don't know their situations, but maybe they didn't have a situation that was as conducive to being as successful as mine. I don't know. I know that all of the mentors from last year are not mentors this year. I don't know what that means. Just quantitatively looking at numbers.

For Aspiring 2, the invaluable mentoring relationship was something that still resonated strongly within him, yet he believes it may also have prevented others from persisting through the program.

Though Aspiring 2 and Aspiring 6 willingly spoke of their mentors, Aspirings 3, 4, and 7 required a bit of prodding from the researcher to truly open up. Each was very methodical and careful with their choice of words. It became apparent that the participants were so fond of the Aspiring Program, and so grateful for the personal growth and development they experienced in the program, that they struggled to be openly critical of its potential shortcomings. Aspiring 3 commented about how she may have gotten more out of a different placement, given the negatively-skewed feedback she often received during her mentoring experience:

I feel some conflict on that because…the feedback I was given was maybe more negatively skewed versus more confidence building…. I feel I did learn from the experience, but looking back I felt like I could have learned more in a different place.

Aspiring 4 struggled a great deal with her mentor pairing. She, in particular, was one who found more mentoring success with the APP program director than she did with the actual residency-site mentor. She spoke of how the formal mentoring experience greatly prepared her for success for working in the Buckeye Schools, but not so much for being a leader of school reform. She described how it was the program director, as an informal mentor, that helped her
build that confidence in being a school reform leader. She commented,

I would say if I had a stronger mentor who really was a school reform leader the program could have better supported me. I’m working in an east side school very different from my mentor school, I was on the west side, very different environment. Very different challenges and that made a difference as well. I don’t think that prepared me as well to be a school reform leader.

Aspiring 7 noted that whenever you work with anyone in close proximity, you are going to learn from the relationship, whether it is positive or negative. Aspiring 7’s struggle in the mentoring experience was that he struggled with how his mentor led in certain areas of personnel management and he was hesitant to step in because at the end of the day, his mentor was the one who was grading him and his performance. But what that experience taught him was how to “lead up,” while also learning “how to appease the people under you.” He commented,

It was times where I did have to challenge my mentor a little bit and make her think, but it wasn't in a way where ‘Hey, look. You're doing this all wrong. We got to do it this way.’ It was always ‘Have you thought about this?’ Trying to find that middle ground where we can come in and have a discussion and then try to move her to what I was seeing that she might've not been seeing.

**Developing self-confidence through a developing belief in their own future success.** All participants spoke of the challenges within their work. Some spoke of their slower than expected progression. Others even doubted their ability to realize complete reform given the deep-rooted disparate opinions that existed within the district regarding reform in general. Despite this, they all developed a level of confidence that ensured each of them that they have been and are currently on the correct path towards future success in this work. The participants exhibited a growing belief that what they had been trained to do and what they were working toward would be worth it. While they have their doubts about varying aspects of their abilities and about some of their methods of reform, they all possess an unwavering belief in what they can achieve in the future and this translated into a developing self-confidence in the present.
When Aspiring 6 spoke of her first days as an Aspiring, she indicated that she entered the role very unsure of herself. Despite having served as a teacher and STEM coordinator, she was self-conscious about her age and lack of administrative experience. She described how she would probably win the award for “most improved” in the cohort. As she thought about her experience, she commented,

I think that I gained all of the skills necessary to not only be a principal but to make huge changes. To make huge changes in a short amount of time, and to bring a team with us instead of alienating ourselves from our teachers, or communities, or whatever it may be. I think that I had all of that preparation in-line in almost a scaffolded way from institute to residency and then the switch-site month, up to my interviews.

As she thought more deeply about her experience, she then realized, for herself, how her teaching and STEM coordinator background provided her with an ideal foundation for becoming a reform leader because it allowed her to enter the role wanting to provide the best opportunities for students. She also noted how the Aspirings were trained to give and receive low-inference feedback, feedback that is free from interpretation and is non-judgmental. She further explained how that helped them grow even further as leaders of reform. She stated, “[giving and receiving low-inference feedback] is one of the pieces that I think made us the strongest transformational leaders that we could be.” As she thought of herself as a leader of school reform in the future, she described someone fully competent and capable in ability, quite opposite from how she saw herself when she began her Aspiring journey. She noted,

I feel like I will develop my skills in transformational change by two or threefold… I feel like we will have made progress that is related to the same time frame. I feel like my growth will be seen a year in advance, the same way that my growth in the past year was. I grew this much in the Aspiring program, I feel like that will be the same. I grow that same amount in the next year.

Aspiring 4 also spoke of how she entered this work doubting her ability to lead. Having gone through the program, she said that she still lacked some confidence in herself. She jokingly
noted, “I have my doubts daily…hourly.” However, she knew that this feeling of doubt was okay because she was getting increasingly more confident in her ability to lead reform within her school. She described how she was honest with herself and her team when it came to her reform leadership prowess:

We’re not there yet, I’m not there yet with the mission and vision because it’s particular to the school I’m in now. I’m just now really putting that together where I want the school to be in the next two years, three years…four years. I think, too, it’s essential for leaders to like, ‘Okay these are my personal beliefs on education and on students and I’m going to like I am not going to waiver from these.’ I think that’s what a school reform leader has to do because then your staff and your students they start to notice that and then they’ll want to follow you.

Despite her doubts, she revealed an awareness that she is making progress and that she is gaining confidence in her ability to realize reform every day. She went on to powerfully state, “I probably feel even more like oh I can do this even though everyday I’m going into battle and every day I doubt myself, but I do feel more like okay I was supposed to be a principal.”

Aspiring 3 spoke of a different side of confidence from the other participants. Standing alone, she believed in herself and in her preparation, but struggled with the lack of confidence in those around her, which then caused her to doubt herself. Upon graduation from the program, she often wondered if she were taking the right direction for her to bring about reform within the district. When she spoke of herself, she courageously commented,

I’m still not sure this is my right direction because…I struggle with feeling if I’m the right person or not. Some of that is just…I have a really different personality than the other leaders that I know in [BUPSD]. I just don’t see always how I fit in, where 95% of the leaders are ‘Type A’ and I don’t know what type I am. I’m definitely not ‘Type A.’

Despite this internal struggle, she maintained her commitment to her students and her belief in the program. She went on to note,

If every assistant principal and principal were trained with the Aspiring program, schools would move because you actually have two people who are pushing for reform rather than still that one person pushing reform and their assistant is holding down the fort.
While the other participants did not have as significant of doubts in their abilities to be leaders of reform, they did speak of their respective needs to continue growing and learning, all the while knowing that they had the ability to be successful in this work. Aspiring 7 commented, “I see myself still as a student. I'm still learning, but at the same time, I see my direction. I see the direction I need to go. I can almost assure that next year will be better than this year.” When Aspiring 1 described herself she said she was “confident and competent.” She noted that the “learning curve” in this work resulted from the Aspiring experience. She said she is no longer intimidated with questions about her age, ideas, or the anger and frustration that comes with constantly making failing test grades. When she spoke of her confidence she noted,

I feel very confident that I have the skill set to make this work and I can't speak to my data at this point, being that it's my first year, but if you were to come back in two to three years I'm fairly confident that you would see significant growth within my staff and students and their scores. Growth that would be tangible and that [the superintendent] would be looking for in his schools.

The participants’ candid awareness of their limitations, coupled with a confidence in their respective abilities to lead, has enabled them to be leaders of reform. Aspiring 2 suggested that if he maintained this level of awareness about himself he would be sure to see success in leading reform in his school into the future. He said,

In terms of me as a school reformer, I'd like to think that all of the personality traits that I think will work for me for this job are still there. The energy, the enthusiasm, but I'm hoping that two or three years’ worth of experience and using that feedback cycle, what worked, what didn't work. I'd like to see more refined in terms of focus.

**Ownership of the reform agenda through developing a trailblazing leadership mentality.** Many of the participants spoke with great conviction and confidence about their duty to lead reform within the BUPSD. There was an acute sense of ownership felt by the participants to see the reform through. The participants saw themselves as trailblazing reform leaders within
the BUPSD. While achieving a complete cultural shift within the district would prove to be challenging, the participants knew that other cohorts of Aspirings would be coming to the district after them and that eventually a critical mass of reform leaders would be able to support and sustain the effort at scale.

Aspiring 5 discussed how the Aspirings were simply trained differently than most administrators, and they hoped that different training would translate to an ownership of the reform. She said she believed that the Aspiring graduates were held to a higher standard than the other administrators across the district. She commented,

We are to question and to try different strategies instead of just accepting what's been done in the past. I think also really challenging us to understand that we are here to make the change in the district…to improve academic achievement, to improve the schools.

Aspiring 5 said that she was “the leader of the team working to make changes” within her school. When she thought about her role across the district, she noted,

Within the district, I think that all of us from the Aspiring Principals Program, our role is to challenge the mindset of the other administrators. To not just sit back in the room, and we've talked about it. We shouldn't be in the principals' meeting being the group that's sitting at the back of the room playing on their phones. We are the ones that should be there, should be present, should push back when we disagree with someone's philosophies. Again, to challenge others sitting in the room.

The pressure from this expectation of ownership reverberated within the minds of the participants. Aspiring 4 expressed this:

There is a huge amount of pressure and I do feel that being the first cohort of the Aspiring program. There has been the mentality that, ‘Oh you guys are going to do better things and you better do greater things than any other first-year principal who is coming into our district.’ I do feel like there’s a lot of pressure to prove my worth as a school reform leader.

Aspiring 6 noted that this pressure to achieve successful reform was “very clear, very quick,” and it occurred to her by the second day of the Aspiring program that she was going to be counted on to lead the charge. She experienced explicit pressure from district administrators and
other community stakeholders who supported the Aspiring program, and also an indirect pressure from critics of the reform plan. Lastly, the participants felt an intrinsic pressure to make sure that they made a difference in the lives of the students and families who they served.

Aspiring 6 also knew that the job would not be easy. She commented, “We knew that we would need to have a lot of stamina and patience as this group of school leaders with this new mindset of transformational change grew in the district and continue this momentum forward with the plan.” Even though the reform leaders are outnumbered by critics in the district, she believed that there have been signs of positive progress, such as non-Aspiring school leaders beginning to support the reform plan.

**Awareness of Organizational Opportunity Through the Use of Personal Reflexivity**

Participants became quite aware of how their own actions inhibited or advanced the reform they were trying to implement. The participants often spoke of personal growth and struggles they experienced during their time in the program, and also recalled a variety of positive and negative experiences of the program in general. Their developing skill of personal reflexivity allowed them to discover who they had become in the context of change and how the interdependent nature of who they were becoming as leaders of school reform and their interpretations of the reform plan itself impacted the reform outcomes for their schools and the district as a whole.

The value of their personal reflexivity had three outcomes: first, it allowed the participants the opportunity to critically think about their own experiences of progression and to determine, through their own experience, how employing empathetic leadership was necessary in their reform work; second, the participants experienced a variety of thought-provoking hurdles throughout their transitions, and it was not until they started to develop an awareness of their
own leadership capacity through a detailed understanding of the reform-driven principalship that they truly began to make sense of their roles as leaders of school reform; third, the participants found comfort within their challenging surroundings, once in the principalship, by retreating to the mindset of an Aspiring. Their mental retreating to a place of familiarity and comfort provided them with an opportunity for reflection, which supported their progression forward.

**Emergence of an empathetic leadership style through a developing affinity for others.** The participants’ focus on data and the candid awareness of their own limitations and areas of growth further enhanced their capacity to receive criticism, which they often spoke of as an essential characteristic for success in the polarized reform environment within the BUPSD. The participants, however, almost immediately realized as leaders that sensitivity for those involved in the reform, a slight diversion from their Aspiring training, was essential if they were to find common ground with those on their teams.

The participants also spoke of how their Aspiring training was very strict and matter of fact, and how little attention was paid to the nuances of interpersonal communication. The participants felt strongly that their training prepared them well to be reformers who could engage with teachers, students, and other school stakeholders. However, the participants’ softer-side had not been well developed, and their roles quickly became a delicate balance of tough school reform leader and empathetic people person.

Aspiring 4 described how the BUPSD has historically operated under a “very ‘Joe Clark’ type of leadership style, where it is ‘my way or the highway.’” While this leadership style resembled the leadership mindset of the Aspiring trained leader—a stern, knowledgeable, and visionary leader, neither of the three approaches were completely ideal in preparing the participants to successfully manage the softer side of human interaction. Aspiring 4 knew that
she had to get to know her team and her team had to get to know her before they could trust and support one another through the challenges of reform. She commented,

I know I couldn’t have gone in there day one…for instance we just started; we’re going to do Teach Like a Champion and we’re going to do one strategy every two weeks and I said at my PD, ‘My expectation is that when I go into your classroom I’m seeing you utilize no opt out.’ I could not have done that in October in a professional development and said to my staff, ‘It is my expectation that I see no opt out.’ They would have thrown a chair at me. I do think it’s building relationships with staff, I had to do that first because they weren’t used to a leader who would say, ‘This is what I want to see instructionally in your class.’

Aspiring 4 knew that her learned approach had to be modified, for it was not ready to be used with her team. The school never had a strong instructional leader, and her attempts to reform in that way would not have gone over well with her team, especially not right away.

Aspiring 5 spoke of how she has “softened since the program ended.” She described how the Aspirings worked on interpersonal communication, but it was among one another in a very direct and impersonal way, often in front of the entire cohort. She noted how this approach bred resolve, but also how her “understanding of what that leadership looks like as a new principal is definitely softer than I thought it was going to be.” One aspect perhaps missing from the interpersonal communication during their trainings was an understanding of how to utilize it when actually making the transition into a building and engaging with a staff already in place. She further noted,

I also really understood now transitioning into a building how different it is at every school. In the program, I'm taught to have hard conversations and you have to come in strong. You have to do X, Y, Z. Then when I get to a school that doesn't function that way, that doesn't deal well that way, where they have to be massaged a little bit more and coached a little bit more. Because telling them isn't going to get the end result you need. For me, it's been a mind shift, because I've had to understand the role I thought I was going to be placed. Maybe not the way in the approach I have to take actually in this school.
Aspiring 5’s awareness of the needs of her team also speaks to the quality of her training. Her developed confidence of self-reflection had enabled her to confidently veer off-course when she needed to adjust for the sake of her team, and ultimately for the sake of the reform.

Even with the opportunity to “build” their team from the ground up, as in the case for both Aspiring 6 and Aspiring 7, they still had to learn to engage with their teams. While both acknowledged the advantage of hand-picking their staffs, they also spoke of the delicate process of developing a new team and creating a culture that would allow them to sustain momentum throughout the year.

Aspiring 6 was confident that her team had all successfully signed-on to the challenge of being a reformer, as they took the job knowing what her expectations were for the work and what her plans were to get there. Her growing affinity for her team created an empathetic approach that challenged her to ensure that her team became and remained cohesive. Aspiring 7 similarly had a growing affinity for his team, and he empathized with them to ensure that they remained energized and focused on the students. He noted,

One thing I try to do is I try to learn and try to know my personnel. I know which people are struggling in the classroom with management. Just trying to make sure that you know them intimately enough that they can always come to you.

Aspiring 2 similarly spoke of an affinity towards his students and their families, and of how this led to his emerging empathetic leadership style that allowed him to move his building forward. Aspiring 2 noted how each student and family is rooted within a social context and how the methods to engaging each of them is not always black and white. He commented,

You have to have an opportunity to sit down with your parents who are struggling or just concerned about their children and find out what's going on with them. That motto where they don't have a good grade, they're not doing their work. That's one sentence in a book. You know what I mean? It's like reading the first sentence of Where the Red Fern Grows. You're not going to figure out that the dogs die in the end by reading that sentence. You have to actually sit down and talk to your parents.
Aspiring 2 described a situation from the third day of school in which an eighth grade student had to be carried out on a stretcher after passing out from inebriation. Though the rules dictated suspension for the student, he knew suspension would not ultimately help the student. Instead, he treated the student and the parent as people, and investigated further into what was going on outside of school:

I didn't suspend her. Had her mom in. We talked. Mom's struggling. She works two jobs, never home. This girl's home alone. I had to figure out what was going on. I made a plan with mom. I made a promise what I could do, what she could do. She's been successful since.

As Aspiring 1 noted, “the Aspirings were trained to be tough and this was largely done through their repeated exposure to giving and receiving low-inference feedback.” She went on to note that,

Most people are not low inference 100% of the time. My staff would die if I was never like ‘hey good work on that.’ They need that, they definitely need that. Outside of the program I don't want anybody that's low inference all of the time, nobody is. It's inhuman. It was the realization that “being human” would help the participants turn the corner on being more successful in engaging in reform with their staff, students, and stakeholders.

Awareness of their own leadership capacity through a critical understanding of the reform-driven principalship. Aspiring 1 spoke of how as her awareness of instructional leadership techniques grew, so did her awareness of her own leadership capacity grow. She described fundamental areas of growth, such as developing an awareness to critically analyze everything she saw in a classroom— things that would likely go unnoticed to the untrained eye. She described how they used those critical analyses to develop recommendations for reform:

We were forced in that program to do weekly teacher observations. To transcribe everything that was going on and collect that data of what could be actionable there… you were just furiously typing. They had pictures on the wall. They had this on the desks. The kids were saying this, teachers were saying this. To really focusing in on what was
the instructional practice that you were observing? What were the kids actually doing? Is the standard's aligned? All of these things. Then using that data to create an action plan on how you were going to raise your building's test scores.

Aspiring 1 went on to describe how she gained a self-awareness of how to use student data to drive change, which involved much more than simply having the data on hand, and required an understanding of the data and of why certain aspects of the teaching-learning dynamic worked while others did not. She went on to describe how combining robust teacher observations with effectively-utilized data became a pivotal turning point in her understanding of her own leadership capacity.

As they progressed throughout their Aspiring experience, many of the participants saw the reform leader role somewhat synonymous to that of the role of instructional leader. As Aspiring 1 stated, “We know that statistically the number one factor in a kid’s success is an effective teacher.” The others shared this sentiment. Aspiring 2 further noted, “I think the most important part of being a principal is you have to continually learn curriculum.” He went on to note that if you are going to be that instructional leader you need to learn what you expect teachers to teach. He stated, “If you're going to ask them [teachers] to do something you have to A, be competent enough to demonstrate and B, you have to show them. You have to be in it with them.”

Aspiring 3 noted that the concept of instructional leadership was a big shift from how the district principals had operated in the past. She acknowledged her own misconception about the reform-driven principalship prior to the Aspiring experience, stating,

Even what I view the principal coming into the program. In the past, I'd seen the principal as the person who was managing the school; putting out fires, helping to see if there was a problem and figure out solutions, but not necessarily the person that was in classrooms coaching.
She described how she became more confident in her ability to lead reform as she gained a more detailed understanding of the school reform-leader role. Aspiring 6 also commented on how every aspect of their experience was aligned to make them reform leaders. She noted,

There was no part of our work, our assignments, our residency or our feedback that was not aligned to transformational change. That goes down to the detailed level of coaching, progress monitoring, professional development for adult learners. All of it was aligned to making strong sustainable changes and building leadership within our teams that we would work with.

Many of the participants spoke of a desire to obtain a level of team-sustainability that would no longer require them to be the leader. Aspiring 3 noted her idea of “leading from behind”, similar to how she used to run her classrooms when she was a teacher. She spoke of the lack of sustainability that existed around large-scale reform that is centered on one person. When that person leaves, the reform leaves with them and that is not good for anyone involved. The amount of time that the participants felt it would take for them to enter a school and bring it to a point of sustainable reform averaged about five years. Aspiring 7 spoke for most of his fellow Aspiring when he stated,

When you've truly reformed the school that means the school is operating and it's sustainable. It's operating in a manner that it's not the leadership or it's not the people in power that's making things happen. It's actually the fact that that person came in, put systems in place that no matter who's in the leadership role in this building, the building's still operating effectively. Things are rolling. There's a culture that's been established. This processes just works. Things just work.

Another aspect of the participants’ awareness of their capacity had to do with their awareness to operate within both the macro and micro levels of reform. A leader of reform had to know the district, as well as the community. Aspiring 2 noted that to be good at the student-level, you have to know your district and your community. He stated, “If you're going to work in urban education, you have to find out what's going on. If you're going to work in education, period, you need to find out what's going on with your community.”
**Sense of comfort through retreating to an “Aspiring” mindset.** Despite having graduated from the APP, all of the participants noted in one way or another that they were still within their respective journeys of becoming fully-capable leaders of school reform. There was a tangible benchmark that they were trying to achieve and they would know within themselves when they got there. Within the formal principalship, the participants often encountered circumstances where they experienced impediments to their progression as leaders of school reform. As a result, they often retreated to the mindset and ideals of the “Aspiring” in order to obtain a sense of direction that would enable them to effectively navigate the challenges before them.

Aspiring 1 spoke of her dedicating upwards of 80% of her day engaging in some type of Aspiring-influenced behavior. She also spoke of her direct supervisor, a regional superintendent, and how this person, who was also a new hire to the district, was valuable to her by reinforcing and perpetuating the mission of the Aspiring program. She further commented on her belief that her Aspiring colleagues were likely carrying-on in the same manner, despite having different regional superintendents who may not be reinforcing the teachings of the Aspiring program. She noted, “I would venture to say that they probably do spend a good portion of their day doing those things regardless of their [regional superintendent].

Aspiring 2 spoke of how, despite no longer being in the program, he still plugs into the program to get through his day. He discussed having to deal with difficult staff and how, as an Aspiring, they would work on having “difficult conversations.” The practice of having these conversations provided him with a mindset of success in the face of adversity. He said he knows he could not have had an effective difficult conversation with a teacher or staff member had it not been for the Aspiring program. He commented, “I take that approach that I have to continually be in Aspiring.”
Aspiring 6 recalled her first days as a principal and how she only made it through due to her ability to mentally acquire the mindset of herself as an Aspiring. She stated,

There was a phase…when we did not have a [regional superintendent] and that I was not meeting with [anyone from the district offices]. We were just running a race to start school… I was definitely focused on implementing everything that we had learn to the best of my ability in that short time frame of about two months before school started. Once school started, again, there is about a one-month, two-month span that I felt like we were in startup mode. It was almost kind of a survival mode. I was still trying to implement those things that I had been taught, like those things that had been ingrained and what we knew we should do…I would say maybe in October, I started really coming back to a reflection standpoint, that's when I started sharing some data with the [district office] and looking at the school and my needs in general and the school-wide needs and started highlighting, ‘These are our gaps. This is where we need support. This is where I need support. This is where our teachers need support.’ Just laying it out all based on data, of course. Just the way we'd been taught.

She went on to describe how she had begun to turn the corner of no longer needing to retreat for direction all the time. She spoke of how her Aspiring experience was so deeply-rooted that it felt as if it was now natural to who she was as a leader. She further described how she had begun to reach a place within herself where she did not have to seek the Aspiring mindset, for it was her mindset. This perspective of her new self, that Aspiring 6 had begun to see within herself, was likely what the other participants were trying to describe when they spoke of their continued growth towards becoming fully-capable leaders of school reform. While all the participants progressed at roughly the same rate, partially due to the structured aspect of the program, their individual experiences were all different.

**Conclusion**

The findings clearly indicated that significant similarities existed amongst the participants. A review of the study’s themes indicated that on average, 90% of the participants were connected to each of the identified subordinate themes. This convergence of themes across the participants provided for a thorough exploration into the shared transition experiences of the
graduates of the Aspiring program. In addition, the experiential divergences for some participants did manifest as criticism of certain aspects of the program, which resulted in different transition experiences for the participants. This supports the explanation as to why the participants were all at different points on the path to becoming leaders of school reform, despite the structured nature of the experience.

The participants’ experiences prior to the Aspiring program also seemed to impact how they interpreted their transition experiences throughout the program. All of the participants spoke of a two-dimensional benefit of the program—it prepared them to be leaders of reform, and prepared them to lead specifically within the Buckeye schools. All of the participants agreed that they entered the program specifically to be leaders of school reform. A divergence occurred, however, with respect to how much they experienced growth as a leader of school reform. Those new to the Buckeye community found that exposure to the nuances of Buckeye were beneficial to their growth and development. Aspiring 7, who was from out of state, spoke of the benefit of the district-centric experience. Despite his previous experience as an assistant principal, the experience in BUPSD served him well throughout his transition into becoming a school-reform leader. He was aware of the transferability of the experience to reform, despite it being so focused on being a leader within BUPSD. He noted,

It's a [BUPSD specific program]. Yeah. You can take what you learn and apply it anywhere, but a lot of the things like your school-based budgeting, and the different tools that's used here in the district, you actually were able to get that training upfront...you’re planning knowing what you’re getting into.

Aspiring 4, also new to the Buckeye district, but not the Buckeye community, felt that her Aspiring experience was actually less driven by reform than it was by simply being a principal within the Buckeye schools. When she spoke of her time working in a charter school in the Buckeye community, she noted, “I was in [a charter school] and so I felt like I was more a part of
the school reform movement at [the charter school] and now I feel a bit on the outside frankly.”

This outsider experience impacted her interpretations of herself as a leader of school reform. While she had a core belief in her being called to the principalship, she came to the understanding that if she was going to find success in her role, she needed to be more of a school leader that simply tried to help the students in her school succeed, more than she needed to be a school reformer. She commented,

Frankly I’ve actually realized that, how do I say this? To move this building that I’m in right now and to make it an excellent school I had to get rid of all those lofty terms and just not talk about urban reform or these particular … I guess, how do I say this? I just have to focus on my 300 kids and not think about like, ‘Oh I’m an urban school reform leader, I am taking this mid-performing school and we’re going to make it an excellent school,’ and using the tenets of urban reform.

While Aspiring 4 had this anti-reformer perspective of her role, which was an outlying perspective amongst the participants, she did note that her staff would say otherwise and consider her a reformer. Aspiring 4 remained aware that she still possessed reformer characteristics even though she tried to internalize it in a different way. This became a part of her struggle as she tried to find the ideal approach to finding success.

Aspiring 5, who had worked her entire professional career within the Buckeye schools, described how her pre-APP experience of working only in low-performing east-side schools has limited her confidence in being able to lead reform in schools that do not meet those qualifications. While she spoke more to her growth in the program relative to her leadership capacity to lead reform versus her leadership capacity to lead within Buckeye, she was not confident that she could be successful in any school environment in the district. She noted,

I don't know that I will say that I can be a successful in any school environment, but not because of this Aspiring Principal program or not, but based on my experience in the districts. I wouldn't want to be placed in the west side school, that's maybe a little bit has more parent involvement, and high performing. Because I've never worked at a school with those characteristics. I don't know how to take a high school, and move it higher or
I've had whether through the Aspiring program, or just through teaching in the district, has been a low performing school that we're pushing up. I don't think that my inability, or my concern about going to a different type of school, is related to the Aspiring program, but more related to my experiences.

She further described how the program only reinforced this belief in herself, as they focused only on schools in need of reform.

This conclusion displayed some of the potential implications past experiences have on the interpretations of meaning participants made regarding their transitions into the role of school reform leader. Despite the participants progressing through the same formalized program, participant feedback revealed that aspects of their former selves can remain and impact individual progression in a multitude of ways.
CHAPTER V: IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how seven graduates from the inaugural cohort of the Aspiring Principals Program (APP) in the Buckeye Urban Public School District (BUPSD) understood and made sense of their transitions into the role of school-reform leader. The BUPSD, which is in the midst of comprehensive legislative-driven reform to increase the number of high-performing schools in the district, has looked to principal development as a key opportunity (BUPS, 2014). The BUPSD APP is a district-sponsored principal-preparation program, co-developed for the district with the support of the NYC Leadership Academy (NYCLA), a nationally-recognized non-profit that supports districts and organizations around the nation in training high-quality educators to lead schools. The creation of the BUPSD APP is grounded by research that suggests university-based principal-preparation programs have struggled to keep pace with the unique needs of urban schools (Levine, 2005). Given the fundamental role that building leaders play within a school ("Aspiring Principals Program," 2015), especially in an urban school and district undergoing comprehensive reform, the district elected to train its new leaders from within, educating them on the nuances of the BUPSD, as well as on the intricacies of leading successful urban school reform.

This study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine how the seven study participants understood and made sense of their transitions into the role of school-reform leader. The double-hermeneutic nature of IPA provided the researcher the opportunity to derive meaning from the participants’ interpretations of their experiences. The analysis process generated the following superordinate and subordinate themes:

1. Developing belief in the system of change
   a. Awareness of purpose through buying-in to the legislation-driven reform
   b. Resilience through a reliance on other Aspirings
   c. Transcendence of self-preservation through altruistic beliefs and behaviors
2. Perseverance through meeting difficult messaging head-on
   a. Confidence in their own leadership through the use of data-derived decision making
   b. Understanding of organizational culture and climate through decoding district impediments to reform
   c. Compulsion to bear the brunt of external pressures negatively impacting reform

3. Progression towards self-actualization through self-reflection
   a. Awakening of an innate aptitude for leadership through making meaning from mentoring
   b. Developing self-confidence through a developing belief in their own future success
   c. Ownership of the reform agenda through developing a trailblazing leadership mentality

4. Awareness of organizational opportunity through the use of personal reflexivity
   a. Emergence of an empathetic leadership style through a developing affinity for others
   b. Awareness of their own leadership capacity through a critical understanding of the reform-driven principalship
   c. Sense of comfort through retreating to an “Aspiring” mindset

A review of the themes offered the researcher the opportunity to identify implications the study had for theory, research, and practice. A review of the study’s implications further provided the researcher with an opportunity to identify recommendations for future research.

**Implications for Theory**

This study revealed many consistencies within the liminality literature. Anfara (1997) noted that the liminal progression is consummated when the individual operates in a clearly defined and stable context supported by distinct rights and obligations of the new context. The participants’ descriptions of a need for continued growth and development toward becoming leaders of school reform, a feeling of being “betwixt and between” their old and new selves, suggested that they were still within their liminal progression. Despite the participants having completing the formal APP process, within the context of leading urban reform in a district that was, in many respects, within a liminal state of transition itself, the findings still aligned with the
theory suggested by Baynham and Simpson (2010), which stated situational context plays an important role in the transition process of liminal beings.

Liminality theory suggests that transitional beings are detached from existing social and cultural contexts, and that the detachment often results in uncertainty for the liminal being (Anfara, 1997). Study participants revealed that they were removed from the organizational structures that permeated their buildings and the district, resulting in dissonance which created an often ambiguous environment for the participants. The participants all experienced a growing belief in their own abilities to implement reform that could be characterized as successful, as revealed by the subordinate theme—developing self-confidence through a developing belief in their own future success. The realization of successful reform implementation could, therefore, be equated to the consummation of their liminal progression. As Anfara noted, personal resistance to the liminal transition can hinder the liminal progression. Part of their struggle then became maintaining the self-confidence to see it through to the end. The participants’ self-confidence was supported largely through making meaning of their experiences through self-reflection, as indicated by the theme, progression towards self-actualization through self-reflection.

The participants entered the Aspiring program from varied ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds, and each approached their work from unique perspectives derived from their unique professional experiences. While this conflicts with Turner’s (1987) seminal study of the homogenous society of the Ndembu tribe of Northwestern Zambia, Bettis (1996) noted that, despite the varied attributes that may exist upon their entry into the liminal state, the liminal transition created an equality between members. This equality occurs because the first stage of the liminal process involves a separation for the liminal being, which strips individuals of their
former selves so they can then enter the liminal phase as blank slates, no longer representative of
their former selves, nor yet possessing any qualities of their forthcoming selves.

Many of the participants expressed that they were mentally and physically affected by the
separation process, a process which began immediately and forced them to reveal and understand
their respective weaknesses and vulnerabilities. As indicated in the subordinate theme,
*awareness of purpose through buying-in to the legislative-driven reform*, the participants
experienced a need to find purpose as they began the process of losing connection with their
originating social context. The participants found meaning and purpose in the belief of the
reform itself. As the participants began to realize that they were all experiencing a similar place
of vulnerability, they found strength in their weakness through relying on the support of one
another as indicated by the subordinate theme, *resilience through a reliance on other Aspirings.*

The findings of the study conflicted with the separation aspect of liminality theory in that
the presence of the former self emerged within the liminal progression as a way for the liminal
beings to find meaning within their transitions. While the liminality literature spoke to the
separation of social distinction that occurs to support uniformity amongst the liminal members
(Turner, 1987), the awareness of how the former self influences liminal teachings was not
discussed. The participants’ interpretations of their experiences was often situated within
contexts that existed prior to the APP.

The participants’ interpretations revealed that all references of influential past
experiences were related to prior professional experiences. While it did not come across in this
study, it is plausible to suspect that the personal past experiences of the participants could also
begin to manifest within the liminal progressions of the participants. This divergence also brings
into question the length of time spent within the liminal space and the potential negative
implications liminal time has on the liminal being. Furthermore, moving a liminal being on to their new role before they have progressed through the liminal phases, as this study indicates happened to the participants, potentially explains the former self reappearing for the liminal being. The divide between the two realities in which the participants began to exist was also further complicated due to the systematic dismantling of structural supports (e.g. mentoring, liminal discourse), which theory suggests is needed by the liminal beings to progress properly (Bosetti et al., 2008; Turner, 1987).

Junker (2013) noted that the liminal transition emerged as a space in which to affirm solidarity amongst its members. The study strongly supported this theoretical finding, as the participants found that a significant portion of their resilience derived from their reliance on one another. The support structures established among the group, evidenced by their descriptions of trust between members, contributed greatly to their growing belief in the system of change.

This study further contributed to the liminal concept of solidarity by showcasing how dysfunction within a group of liminal beings can spur negative dialogue and add to the destruction of the cohesive properties of the group. As indicated by the superordinate theme, *developing belief in the system of change*, the participants’ awareness of purpose, reliance on one another, and growth of altruistic beliefs spurred a contention for those who detracted from this espoused set of values. Although the specific reason behind the departures where never revealed to the researcher, it became apparent that the two Aspirings who were removed from the original cohort of ten acted in ways that were dissimilar to the cultural norms of the rest of the cohort members. In particular, the dismissed members were described as not adding value to the liminal experience and as negatively affecting the progression of the other Aspirings. While it was clear the participants understood that their experiences would be unique, it was also evident that, once
they reached a certain threshold of divergence from the group norm, a degree of toxicity developed, and a dismantling of sorts was necessary before the entire effort was at risk of collapse.

The influence possessed by the liminal group to discard its own dead weight shed new light onto the theoretical underpinnings of liminality when things go awry; however, it also aligned with the theory in support of the synergistic capacity of the unification of liminal beings and the role leadership and guidance play in the liminal development process. Bosetti, Kawalilik, and Patterson (2008) noted that dialogue between liminal members can help sustain a healthy community among the members in the absence of a guide. In accordance with Bosetti et al., who further noted that instability during transition can cause confusion and anxiety, the participants described a muddled environment prior to the dismissal of their disruptive peers. The participants noted the time elapsed before the program director removed the two dysfunctional cohort members, which subsequently prolonged the whole groups’ dysfunction, exacerbated their individual frustration and anxiety, and created a suspicion that their liminal guide did not have their best interests at heart. The ability of the participants to unify within their own state of ambiguity, to ensure that they supported the welfare of the greater good, affirms their commitment to one another, and the theory of liminal progression as a whole.

Junker (2013) also noted that, when a liminal group comes to the realization that they can achieve more collectively than they can alone, the members embrace their multiple zones of proximal development, and *communitas* develops as a sign of liminal vitality and solidarity. This study confirmed the presence of liminal vitality and solidarity upon the dismissal of the two cohort members who resisted group norms. Once this level of *communitas* among members developed, their collective progression towards reaggregation became obtainable. Junker further
explained that a resulting factor of community between liminal beings is realization of unconventional paradigms from how society should operate. This supports how the cohort model of liminal progression catalyzes the development of new ways of thinking and acting. This new insight for the participants became the core of the liminal transition. The participants’ entire progressions were rooted in the acceptance of and belief in their new approach to education reform. The concept of communal solidarity and vitality permeated all of the findings from the study. The participants’ developing belief in the system of change, their perseverance through difficult messaging, and their progression towards self-actualization and organizational capacity were all grounded in the establishment of vigorous action for change.

This study also revealed the consequences of sustained liminal progression for the liminal being. Though the researcher encountered optimism in each of the participants who suggested that their resolve for this work was often tested, the participants experienced doubt quite frequently. Given that the participants had completed the formal APP process, their ties to one another systematically became fragmented. This disconnect between time-bound structural transitions and the realities of natural liminal progression caused the participants to lose much of their formal and informal guidance. The participants all confirmed that their connections to other Aspirings and mentors, to whom they had spoken on a daily basis, significantly decreased upon assuming their positions as principal. As Bosetti et al. (2008) noted, this lack of guidance and ability to communicate can lead to developmental disaster.

Hurlock et al. (2008) noted how sustained disillusionment due to extensive liminal transition can cause the liminal being both physical and mental harm. Hurlock et al.’s description of natality, or the illumination of progression for the liminal being, as a meaningful pedagogical experience, was also supported by this study. Participants spoke of the unity they experienced
with one another as they progressed along their journeys to becoming leaders of school reform, yet, as they left the comforts of the program, having not yet acquired the characteristics associated with social stability within their new environments, they struggled. Though some struggled more than others, all saw themselves as outsiders to the reform work. One participant’s personal struggle led her to question where she fit within the social structure as a whole.

While the experiences of the participants aligned with the literature, their disconnect from social stability within the principalship proved to be challenging; however, the natal movement of the participants had begun. While some were further along in their natal progression then others, all participants saw a glimpse of their future selves, and were building confidence that they would realize their goals. This natal observation stage proved critical in the liminal progression for the participants, especially given that the structural components of the liminal progression were removed from them before they probably should have been. As Hurlock et al. (2008) described, the glimmer of illumination of a future self after a period of extended darkness is significant to the progression to the final stage.

Hurlock et al. further suggested that natal enlightenment could cause a personal sense of advocacy on behalf of the liminal being. This study revealed early signs of supporting this claim of advocacy, as participants began to strategically navigate their bureaucratic structures to bring about changes that would benefit them as they looked toward models of sustainability. Some participants advocated for staffing changes, others for funding, and others for materials and supplies. The participants’ sense of ownership for the reform agenda began to grow as they developed a *trailblazing mentality* within their roles as leaders of school reform.

This study also revealed the *innate aptitude for leadership* the participants developed from the meaning they derived from their formal and informal mentoring relationships. As
Turner (1987) noted, liminal progression is often supported by guides that help usher liminal beings through a rites of passage by providing stability through the uncertainty that exists within the liminal state. This study aligned with the theory in that the participants experienced positive progression as a result of the value gained from the structural guides provided by the program. The director of the Aspiring program ensured fidelity to the program’s mission and goals, and served as their informal mentor. The program contained a formal mentoring component designed to support the participants while in their residency sites. This differentiated-mentoring approach proved beneficial, as not all participants found equal value in their formal mentoring relationships. While all the participants described the mentoring component as an integral piece of their development, not all recalled positive mentoring experiences. Despite some negative experiences, all of the participants did note that the mentoring experience led to positive progression, albeit to differing degrees. The participants who experienced a more self-fulfilling mentoring relationship seemed to progress faster in their respective liminal journeys. Findings also suggest that the consistent stability carried beyond the program helped move these participants further into their natal space.

A second critical divergence from the liminality theory resulted from the participants deviating from their liminal teachings to find success in their progression toward their new selves. This deviation was consistent among all participants, as indicated by the subordinate theme, *emergence of an empathetic leadership style through a developing affinity for others.* Participant training was driven by an authoritative approach and led by practices that had no judgement value and no emotional connection. This metrics-based approach did not bold well, as a sole approach, for the participants when they entered their new positions after completing the APP. The participants all diverged from a fully non-judgmental approach, and complimented
their low-inference efforts with empathetic approaches. This two-pronged approach allowed
them to engage with the emotional side of their teams. This divergence was uniformly
experienced as a significant success for the participants in gaining support for their efforts at
obtaining buy-in for the reforms that they were trying to implement.

**Implications for Research**

This study revealed outcomes that were both consistent with and divergent from the two
main bodies of literature within the education reform landscape: the principalship, and school
leader development. The study’s findings prove to be significant to the development of the extant
literature on education reform.

**The Principalship**

West, Peck, and Reitzug (2010) noted a dearth of literature relevant to the principalship
within urban schools. This may be because urban school leaders had often held their positions for
many years (West et al., 2010). As measures of accountability have dramatically increased with
ESEA reauthorizations, such as NCLB and ESSA, urban-principal turnover is expected, given
that principals are now first in line for dismissal if schools do not show signs of improvement
(West et al., 2010). As indicated by the subordinate theme, *compulsion to bear the brunt of*
*external pressures negatively impacting reform*, the study supported the research in that many of
the participants took full responsibility for their school’s success or failure.

The participants also revealed that the concept of the principal accepting sole
responsibility for a school’s success, including for the implementation of reform, was new to the
BUPSD leadership. The participants suggested that school leaders within BUPSD had
historically accepted mediocrity from staff and students, and that their approaches to school
reform were often ineffective. The participants had a confidence in their leadership, as indicated
by the subordinate theme, confidence in their own leadership through the use of data-derived decision making. The participants often suggested that the utilization of data-derived decision-making in leadership and instruction has positioned them to lead successful reform.

As Mills and Niesche (2014) and West et al. (2010) suggested, the urban principalship has evolved into a demanding profession, often requiring long work hours to address internal and external pressures. This study, as suggested by the subordinate theme, awareness of their own leadership capacity through a critical understanding of the reform-driven principalship, revealed that the participants agreed with this finding. The participants often described their initial perceptions of principal training as overwhelming and unapologetic. It was not until the participants were thrown into the principalship that they began to make sense of how their knowledge and understanding of the role contributed to their own confidence of success in the principalship.

The participants also spoke of juggling more responsibilities than any one person could manage, and of how using data to make decisions supported their efforts to lead as reform-driven principals. As indicated by the subordinate theme, sense of comfort through retreating to an “Aspiring” mindset, all of the participants experienced the need to mentally retreat to the level of awareness congruent with the previous level of awareness they had possessed as an “Aspiring.” This return to a familiar place helped ground the participants in their new reality, and reassured them that they could manage the demands and pressures of their positions.

As indicated by the superordinate theme, awareness of organizational opportunity through the use of personal reflexivity, this study further revealed that the participants understood that their roles as reform leaders directly impacted the instructional practices of their teachers. This linear influence on student success aligned with the research presented by
Anderson and Shirley (1995), Carlin (1992), Thomas and Fitzhugh-Walker (1998), White-Smith (2012), and White-Smith and White (2009), all of whom suggested that principal leadership, through its effect on teachers, can positively affect student outcomes. As the participants developed a deeper understanding of the reform-driven principalship, their awareness of their leadership capacity also grew.

A primary outcome from the study was the participants’ engagement with the practices of instructional leadership. The participants all saw themselves as their buildings’ instructional leader, and this understanding, which developed within their liminal progression, aligned with the research presented by Leithwood (2010), who suggested that districts that have increased student success through reform have done so by providing their leaders with opportunities to develop their instructional leadership capacities. Leithwood further suggested that instructional leadership development is also usually achieved by districts that have circumvented university-based principal preparation programs.

Miller’s (2013) assertion that classically-trained school leaders are insufficiently prepared to lead in today’s high-accountability environment was also supported by findings from the participants who had progressed through both a university-based principal-preparation program and the Aspiring program. The four participants who experienced both traditional and non-traditional principal-preparation programs all believed that they could not have successfully led reform without their experience in the non-traditional APP; subsequently, they also felt they would have been just as successful without their experience in the traditional principal-preparation program. As Thomas and Fitzhugh-Walker (1998) noted, the urban principal who exercises transformational leadership understands the process of school restructuring. In addition, Geijsel et al. (2003) noted that transactional leadership can only maintain the status
quo, whereas transformational leadership can drive change and innovation. This suggests that the participants’ experiences with the traditional and non-traditional principal preparation programs produced results that were transactional and transformative, respectively.

Mills and Niesche (2014) described the “hero-complex” that often manifests in passionate urban-school leaders who become emotionally tied to the disadvantaged contexts within their schools, and then seek to bring the school and its students out of their crises. As Mills and Neishe (2014) noted, the hero approach to leadership carries with it a variety of emotional implications, often resulting in reforms more performative than substantive. This study adds to the literature in two distinct ways: all of the participants spoke of “successful reform” as reform that could be sustained without them leading it, and the participants’ interpretations of successful reform aligned with the literature in that successful reform was substantive and allowed leadership to establish a culture of self-sufficiency.

Two of the participants struggled greatly throughout their short tenures with the interplay between the performative and substantive aspects of reform. This adds to the literature in that both of these participants noted their contempt for the hero narrative that they were potentially living out in practice. In addition, they both struggled with feeling like outsiders of the reform movement, although in very dissimilar ways—as one struggled with feeling alienated by her colleagues for her over-commitment to social justice causes within the reform movement, the other felt alienated by her colleagues for her lack of preparation and inability to lead others through it. As White-Smith and Smith (2009) suggested, principals’ perceptions of their work is directly linked to the success of the reform itself. This study revealed that the perceived failures of both the pro-reform and anti-reform cultures promote a hero-complex within these two
participants, even though they knew the hero approach would not result in sustainable reform within their schools.

Dantley (2010) noted that a dissonance can arise when a purpose-driven leader is asked to support something (i.e. a highly resisted reform) that conflicts with their values (i.e. simply helping students succeed). This study examined experiences that were drawn from individuals purposefully progressed to the principalship by being stripped of their former selves as a way to remove their individual values, predispositions, and assumptions; however, as aspects of the participants’ former selves materialized throughout their liminal progressions, intrapersonal conflicts within aspects of the role often developed. Despite this inverse relationship, the two superordinate themes linked to progression towards self-actualization and awareness of organizational opportunity aligned with Dantley’s (2010) research, in that self-reflection and personal reflexivity supported the participants in progressing towards meaning in the role and their function within it.

One outcome of the study that at once both aligned with and diverged from the research on education reform was the empathetic approach to leadership, as indicated by the subordinate theme, *emergence of an empathetic leadership style through a developing affinity for others*. As Leithwood (2006) suggested that essential principal-reform strategies included the setting of the direction for their school, developing their teams, and redesigning the organization, Michalak (2009) likewise noted that principals who did not lead from a foundation of power and control, but rather set out to empower others and join others in their work found greater success at reform. The researcher’s study revealed that the participants initially engaged in a power and control approach, but quickly supplemented the approach with a focus of team and organizational development.
This study diverged from the literature in that the participants started to find success in utilizing a two-pronged approach to reform leadership. Although the participants had been trained not to act on emotion, they realized that, even if they led by example as supportive leaders, their teams would not buy-in to the reform if they did not believe that the leaders understood them as people. While much of the research supported an empowerment approach to leadership, the research did not overtly support the participants’ approach of building team capacity. As White-Smith and White (2009) suggested, to successfully implement reform, principals must meet their teams where they are, and then take them to where they want them to go. The participants all noted that none of their teams were ready for a leadership-style that did not offer a personal connection. Against their Aspiring training, they attempted to build personal relationships with their teams as they systematically instituted authoritative practices.

Hallinger and Anast (1992) noted that a principal’s vision of their role affects their leadership. Anderson and Shirley (1995) also noted that successful reform is centered on the reform leader’s belief in the work and the way that they engage with others to accomplish reform efforts. This study revealed that the participants’ interpretations of their experiences aligned with the findings above. While much of the findings suggested that the participants’ experiences were mostly centered on achieving awareness, developing understanding, and building confidence in their work, a primary conclusion of the study was that the participants’ experienced a developing belief in the system of change. While the study did not reveal a singular path to developing their belief, other than a reliance on each other for support, the participants all experienced a belief in the system of change as a foundation on which to develop themselves, inspire others, and move the reform agenda along in their buildings.
School Leader Development

Huang et al. (2012) and Young (2015) both noted that research has suggested a connection between the quality of a principal’s preparation experience and the relative capacity of the principal’s leadership. Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) noted the value of exploring experience, given the lack of understanding of which components of principal-preparation programs actually influence principal behavior in practice. Marcos et al. (2011) noted the void in the literature exploring what constitutes a successful principal-preparation program, and suggested this void is likely the result of inadequacies with “one size fits all” models of reform.

This study adds to the literature on school-leader development, as suggested by Marcos et al. (2011), in the exploration of the experiences of participants in principal-preparation programs. As the study revealed, participant experiences provided insight to a multitude of programmatic efforts that directly influenced principal behavior. As indicated by the study’s four superordinate themes, participant interpretations of the APP identified outcomes directly linked to participant belief in the system of change, participant perseverance through resistance to reform, participant development of self, and participant development of the organization.

As indicated by the subordinate theme, *awakening an innate aptitude for leadership through making meaning from mentoring*, the study added to the literature on the influence of mentoring and coaching on the success of new principals. This study revealed the participants’ ability to derive meaning from their mentoring experiences, both positive and negative. The participants developed an awareness of their own leadership potential through their ability to derive meaning from their mentoring experiences. This study further revealed that, as participants developed a heightened belief in their own ability to succeed in their role, they developed more self-confidence. The revelation that self-reflection of coaching and mentoring,
as it relates to professional self-efficacy, adds to Versland’s (2013) description of the link between effective principal preparation and principal self-efficacy.

**Implications for Practice**

The implications this study presents to the literature of liminality and to the extant research on education reform has provided the researcher with a framework from which to present implications for practice. The implications for practice are presented as suggestions that affect both policy and practice.

The initial practice-based implication concerns the progression of the Aspirings to the principalship. The Aspiring program was created with a time-bound reality in that when participants completed the program they would be ready for the school reform leader role; however, participants entered the program within a natural reality that did not necessarily align with the structural realities of the program, given that participants would each develop organically. Although two of the participants explicitly noted their preparedness for the principalship even prior to their graduation from the APP, all of the participants maintained their identity as an “Aspiring,” which suggests that they still possessed some of the attributes of their developing selves. This claim was further supported by the participants often noting their respective areas of growth and development while becoming fully-capable leaders of school reform. While research has suggested that support structures, like mentoring and participant discourse, are essential to the progression of the transitional being, time-bound realities of the program potentially removed the participants from the program prior to their full liminal progression, which in effect removed them from their support structures.

These implications bring forth a variety of recommendations to programmatic structure. One option would be to institute a mastery-based structure that would allow participants to
maintain their status within the program, perhaps through a second-year residency, until they achieved full awareness of and belief in their ability to assume the role of school reform leader. As suggested by Griffin, Taylor, Varner, and White (2012), the participants could be given a variety of formative and summative assessments that would allow the program director to measure their respective growth across key metrics identified as benchmarks for reform-leadership success. If a time-bound approach was the only feasible option for a program, then the program must find a way to re-integrate structural supports back into the lives of their new principals, perhaps even for a few years.

With regard to structural components of the program, mentoring and residency placement arose as two critical elements of the participants’ experience. Of particular note was the lack of quality mentors. Given that some participants’ mentors did not have an overwhelming approval rating from the participants, it seems as if the program could benefit from better mentor recruitment, as well as mentor trainings that would equip them to mentor through the espoused values of the reform agenda. To support mentor development, the creation of a community of practice for APP mentors would, as suggested by Scanlan and Miller (2013), establish a shared purpose for the group, and allow the group to learn from one another how to pursue their purpose. Scanlan and Miller (2013) further noted that, whether the community of practice is harmonious or contentious, the members who share a commitment to learning from one another create a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, and shared knowledge, and are therefore potentially powerful forces for transformational learning. As mentoring assignments expand over time, new mentors would be able to join the community of practice and engage in and benefit from the shared knowledge and experiences within the community. The community
of practice would likely improve the efficacy of the mentoring aspect of the participant experience.

In addition to mentoring, residency-site placement, which coincides somewhat with mentor placement, must be aligned with the permanent placement of the principalship. Participant findings suggested that the disconnect resulting from the locations of their placements and hirings affected their success, and that no significant administrative reasoning had gone into establishing congruence between where each Aspiring was placed and hired. Even if potential placements were determined mid-way through the residency component, at least some proactive steps could be taken to best prepare the Aspiring for the actual principalship. For those Aspirings whose residency and principal placements aligned, findings suggested their congruent experiences expedited their leadership progression and development; for those who could not make the connection, findings conversely suggested that their progression had been impeded.

Although the participants were prepped to navigate the challenges of reform-resistant environments, there are practical implications that could support their placement, as well as the overall efficacy of the reform agenda itself. Excluding the two participants who worked together as principal and assistant principal within the same school, the other participants entered school environments where they had no assistant-principal support, or where they had an assistant principal who did not entirely support their reform-based approach. As a result of this administrative disruption, there is potential benefit from running an Aspiring Assistant-Principals Program (AAPP) alongside the APP. The AAPP program could serve as Phase 1 of a 2-Phase principal training process within the BUPSD. The second phase, which would occur likely no sooner than after a year or two of successful service as an assistant principal, would be the APP. The AAPP would prepare aspiring school leaders for the role of reform leader, while also
preparing them to support a principal leading reform. Hiring Aspirings and Assistant-Aspirings in pairs would ensure that each school had a collaborative and reform-focused environment immediately upon their hiring. As Assistant-Aspirings left the field to enter the APP, new cohorts of Assistant-Aspirings could be deployed based on need, and placed within a residency with Aspiring graduates who had new openings. The Aspiring graduates could then serve as residency-site mentors, thus mitigating the possible misalignment between aspiring principal and mentor. Aspiring graduates who became mentors would also enter into the community of practice for APP mentors, thus offering a wealth of insight and experience to the group.

Along the lines of school-leader development, another practice-based implication would be to provide continued professional development for Aspiring graduates throughout their first year. Monthly seminars could bring the cohorts back together, increasing in size each subsequent year, to highlight new research and data relative to school-leadership or education reform. The monthly sessions would also maintain communication between participants. Discussions would allow school leaders to maintain their reliance on one another, share best practices, and support one another through their respective challenges.

In an effort to support current school leaders within the district who have not gone through the Aspiring program, condensed versions of the program, similar to the 18-day professional-development program associated with the Indiana Principals Leadership Academy, as presented by Hallinger and Anast (1992), could help build cohesion between all school leaders across the district. The school leaders could participate in day-long, monthly seminars that highlight key aspects of Aspiring training. During the summer months, the school leaders could participate in smaller, extended trainings to prepare them for the year ahead. The exposure could also encourage practicing principals to actually participate in the Aspiring program.
This last point raises a suggestion for the researcher provided by one of the study participants: the program offer differentiated learning tracks within the program to account for previous administrative experience of entering Aspirings. While some Aspirings could have benefitted more from trainings focused equally across the various principalship domains, others could have focused more heavily of certain domains, like reform integration, if they already had the basics of building management down from previous administrative experience. This perspective could encourage veteran principals to retrain in reform-based tactics if they felt their years of experience were accounted for and were of value to the program and their personal development.

With respect to policy, strategically-developed district-university partnerships could greatly expand the reach and programmatic capacity of a program like the APP. Some of the costs associated with home-grown programs, like the utilization of external consultants to develop the programs, salaries, and benefits for staff and participants, result in potentially large expenses many districts may not be able to sustain over time. As suggested by Lashway (2003), university partners can support districts in identifying high-caliber candidates for their principal-preparation programs, as well as support in identifying high-quality practitioners to serve as mentors and faculty for the program. In addition, university partners can help provide a greater breadth of options for residency experiences for program participants.

Lashway (2003) also noted that universities can, in addition to these potentially cost-saving and beneficial efforts, support districts in offering second-level licensure programs for their school leaders. These programs often include requirements to complete formal mentoring, reflection assignments, portfolio development, and job demonstration skills (Lashway, 2003). The second-level licensure programs align directly with the outcomes and implications from the
study. Mentoring and reflection both arose from the study as experiences that supported the participants’ progressions towards self-actualization. Portfolio development and job-demonstration skills also both align with implications that suggest principal self-efficacy is directly tied to principal performance, and that mastery-based performance may lead to greater principal self-efficacy. While portfolio development and a demonstration of skills would support school leaders in better understanding themselves and their deficits, the two suggestions also align with the study’s suggestion that participant-awareness and understanding of self support their experiences of persevering through difficult messaging, progressing towards self-actualization through self-reflection, and developing an awareness of organizational opportunity through the use of personal reflexivity.

A final implication transcendent of policy and practice is cross-collaboration between principal-preparation programs. As an integral component of the BUPSD’s reform plan, charter-school expansion is a fundamental part of the school-choice landscape. As a result of preliminary collaborations between districts and charter schools in the BUPSD community, one charter-management operator within the BUPSD community recently created its own aspiring-principals program. All involved could benefit from collaborating over program development, resource sharing (potentially including mentoring and residency-site placement), and best practices.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While the literature on the principalship and school-leader development has kept pace with the evolution of mainstream education reform, the proliferation of home-grown principal-preparations programs and other non-traditional efforts of reform, particularly within urban districts and schools, has created a gap in the literature of various studies that could provide
insight to any number of qualitative and quantitative inquires. To build further from the findings of this study, the researcher has identified six recommendations for future research.

Perhaps the most idealistic research stemming from this study would be one that measures the efficacy of the APP’s ability to produce school-reform leaders capable of implementing successful reform, or reform that improves achievement outcomes for their schools and the district. Given the significant human capital and financial investment poured into programs like the APP, it is essential to determine whether these investments produce statistically-significant improvements in student outcomes. Positive outcomes could lead to further studies into best practices, which could potentially lead to replicating programs in urban districts across the country.

As the number of non-traditional principal-preparation programs increases at a steady rate, the scope of the relevant literature must expand accordingly. Future research could expand participant-recruitment to a whole state, a region, or the entire country. A potential starting point for future research could be Aspiring programs co-created by urban school districts and the NYCLA. This would ensure that the foundational elements of the programs are consistent. Such studies could reveal further insight into the effects of context on program efficacy.

Given that this study intentionally selected APP graduates as the baseline for participation, further research could explore how individuals who entered the APP, but did not graduate, made sense of their experience. Identifying non-graduates who continued on to the principalship could determine how they came to understand and make sense of their progression into the school-reform leader role. Similarities and distinctions could be made from cross-referencing the findings with this study. Conversely, if the non-graduates never assumed the
principalship, further exploration of their program experiences could reveal insights to their understanding of when and how they were deterred from the principalship.

As this study engaged with Aspiring graduates in their first year of the principalship, research could also engage with current APP participants to study their understanding and sense-making in the moment. The interpretations of experience would be recorded in real-time, and the sense-making and understanding of the experience would be captured progressively, thus allowing the researcher to analyze how experiences developed throughout the process. The researcher’s secondary interpretative perspective would also be more closely linked to the context, given that he would be serving in a non-participative observer capacity.

Understanding of the correlation between the former self of the participant and the participant’s transition experience into the school reform leader role would also benefit from further study. This study’s theoretical framework of liminality suggested that entrants would be stripped of their former selves as they began their respective journeys into the principalship; however, findings suggested that the participants’ past selves nonetheless impacted their liminal progressions. Further study into the participants’ backgrounds and the roles their backgrounds played in their interpretations could provide insight into programmatic-design opportunities for differentiated preparation.

One final suggestion for further investigation would be to draw correlations between Aspiring experiences and principal behavior. As this study focused on the interpretation of participant experience to develop themes that existed across participants, further study on how those interpretations translated to reform practice could reveal how participant experience influences practice. Generating a better understanding of how experience impacts practice could provide insight into how programs should structure and deliver their content. Such findings could
also affect a variety of program-design elements, such as recruitment. As program administrators become more cognizant of participant characteristics that can trigger certain interpretations, administrators are likely to become more selective with recruitment, as they will better understand how certain past experiences may influence interpretations of the program.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand how seven graduates of the inaugural cohort of the APP in the BUPSD understood and made sense of their transitions into the role of school reform leader. An analysis of the data revealed that the participants interpreted their experiences within the APP to be impactful to their respective transitions into the role of school reform leader. The analysis further revealed four superordinate themes that were consistent across all of the participants:

- Developing belief in the system of change
- Perseverance through meeting difficult messaging head-on
- Progression towards self-actualization through self-reflection
- Awareness of organizational opportunity through the use of personal reflexivity

While the findings from the study aligned with much of the literature on liminality, the principalship, and school-leader development, there were significant implications from the study that addressed a gap in the theory and the research. The study revealed potential for the former self to arise throughout the liminal process, which has significant implications for the development of the liminal being. This also suggests that a total separation from the former self as one enters the liminal stage is highly unlikely. The study suggested that participants could deviate from their liminal teachings if they sought explanation from outside of their liminal space, which was revealed when the participants complemented their non-judgmental, low-
inference approach with an empathetic approach. The study also had significant implications for policy and practice.

The study also constructed a framework from which future research could be conducted. Suggestions for future research include studies to explore the efficacy of non-tradition principal-preparation programs, like APP. Future research that expands the participant recruitment outside of the BUPSD would also provide greater generalizability from findings. Lastly, correlational studies on how participant experience in principal preparation-programs affect reform behavior would help with programmatic design and program efficacy.
References


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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

**Subject Line:** Participants needed for a research study involving graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program

My name is Steven Lake and I am a doctoral student studying education at Northeastern University (Boston, MA). I am conducting a research study to explore how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program from the Cleveland Metropolitan School District have come to understand and make sense of their transition into the role of school reform leader.

I am specifically seeking individuals that completed the Aspiring Principals Program and that were subsequently hired on by the district as either a principal or assistant principal.

Participation in the study primarily involves one 60-90 minute face-to-face interview. Participants will also be provided the opportunity to complete an optional written statement about their transition experience in the Aspiring Principals Program. Written statements should take about 10-15 minute to complete. Once data from the interviews is collected and transcribed, participants will be provided the opportunity to review the interview transcripts for their accuracy.

Your review of the data is encouraged to ensure that your thoughts and ideas are accurately represented by the researcher. Your review should take about 25-30 minutes to complete. Participation is entirely voluntary.

To protect your privacy, your participation in the study will be completely confidential.

Please contact Steven Lake by phone or email for more information, or if you would like to volunteer to participate.

**Cellular Phone:** 216-210-3330  
**Email:** lake.s@husky.neu.edu

Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Steven M. Lake*

Steven M. Lake  
Doctor of Education Student  
College of Professional Studies  
Northeastern University
Appendix B: Recruitment Phone Call Script

Hello. My name is Steven Lake and I am a doctoral student studying education at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

I am conducting a research study to explore how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program from the Cleveland Metropolitan School District have come to understand and make sense of their transition into the role of school reform leader.

I am specifically seeking individuals that completed the Aspiring Principals Program and that were subsequently hired on by the district as either a principal or assistant principal.

Participation in the study primarily involves one 60-90 minute face-to-face interview. Participants will also be provided the opportunity to complete an optional written statement about their transition experience in the Aspiring Principals Program. Written statements should take about 10-15 minute to complete. Once data from the interviews is collected and transcribed, participants will be provided the opportunity to review the interview transcripts for their accuracy.

Your review of the data is encouraged to ensure that your thoughts and ideas are accurately represented by the researcher. Your review should take about 25-30 minutes to complete.

To protect your privacy, your participation in the study will be completely confidential.

Please contact me by phone or email for more information.

I can be reached by phone at 216-210-3330
I can be reached by email at lake.s@husky.neu.edu

Again, that is 216-210-3330 and lake.s@husky.neu.edu

I look forward to discussing the study with you in more detail and to answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigators:
Dr. Tova Sanders (Principal Investigator), Steven Lake (Student Researcher)

Title of Project:
Betwixt and Between: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Aspiring Principals

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 the researcher 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 principal or assistant principal that is a graduate of the Aspiring Principals Program.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to explore how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program understand and make sense of their transition into the role of school reform leader.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a 60-90 minute face-to-face interview. Interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed upon completion. To gain further insight into the experiences of the research participants, the researcher will provide participants the opportunity to submit an optional written statement about their experiences in the Aspiring Principals Program. Written statements are being offered to the participants because they often provide more concise descriptions of experiences than what can be obtained via interviews. Once data from the interviews is transcribed, research participants will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure their accuracy.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a location you choose at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will take about 60-90 minutes to complete. The written statement will be completed on your own time and should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The review of interview transcripts should take approximately 25-30 minutes to complete. The written statement and comments regarding the transcripts, if any, can be picked up from you personally at your school or it can be mailed back to the researcher via the stamped envelope that will be provided to you.
**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There are no major foreseeable risks, harms, discomforts, or inconveniences that a participant should expect to experience as a result of the study. The participant will have to experience a slight inconvenience to accommodate for the time to participate in an interview, and to complete the written statement, which is optional. The researcher is providing all participants the opportunity to schedule interviews during days and times that are accommodating to their schedule.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit from taking part in the study. However, involvement within the study will allow the participants the chance to critically reflect upon their time participating in the Aspiring Principals Program. The opportunity to take part in an in-depth interview of their experience transitioning into the role of a school reform leader may help to draw-out interpretations and conclusions about the experiences that were not initially realized and internalized by the participant. This reflection process may therefore prove to be beneficial to the participant. In addition, the final interpretations and conclusions presented by the researcher may also further the participants’ understanding of the transition experience. Lastly, the information learned from this study may help improve the experience of future cohorts of the Aspiring Principals Program, both locally and nationally, thereby positively impacting the field of education altogether.

**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. To protect your identity, pseudonyms will be used for both your place of employment and for the names of each research participant. All data collected and created electronically will be stored on a password-protected computer. Hard-copy files for each research participant will be labeled with codes (e.g. principal 1) and stored in a locking file cabinet at the researcher’s home office. All records compiled during the study will be kept in a locking file cabinet for a period of three years after the completion of the study. After three years, all records will be shredded and destroyed.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements for compensation or treatment will be made as a result of your participation in the study.

**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 this 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 have as an employee.
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Steven Lake (216-210-3330, or lake.s@husky.neu.edu), the person primarily responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Tova Sanders (t.sanders@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator (faculty advisor) for the study.

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, 490 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 will be no payments for your participation in the study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
No costs will be incurred as a result of your participation in the study.

Is there anything else that I need to know?
Research participants must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study. Participation requires that individuals have completed the Aspiring Principals Program and are now employed by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District as either a building Principal or Assistant Principal.

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
Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Date of Interview: ____________________              Date Transcribed: ____________________

Interviewee Name (Pseudonym):________________________________

Interviewer Name: ___________________________________________

Welcome
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and for taking the time to complete this interview today. Your feedback will be immensely valuable to the overall findings produced from this study.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to explore how graduates of the Aspiring Principals Program in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (Buckeye Urban Public School District – pseudonym) have come to understand and make sense of their experience transitioning into the role of school reform leader.

Purpose of the Interview
Over the next 60-90 minutes I will ask you a series of questions related to your involvement in the Aspiring Principals Program. Your responses to the interview questions will provide me with a deeper awareness of how you have come to understand and make sense of your experience transitioning into the role of school reform leader through your participation in the Aspiring Principals Program. There are no right or wrong answers, so you can be as candid as possible. Please remember that anything you say will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for each participant as a way to ensure your anonymity.

Request to Use a Recording Device
To ensure that I capture all of your comments, I would like to request your permission to audio record this interview. In addition to recording the session, I will also be taking notes. As discussed, pseudonyms will be used on all records and notes to ensure your anonymity. Once audio recordings have been transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. Once all data has been analyzed, all transcriptions and notes will be destroyed. None of your responses will be shared with anyone. Any papers or reports stemming from this research will not include any information that can tie you to the research.

Participant Questions
Do you have any questions that I can answer for you before we begin the interview?
Interview
Audio recording will begin now

I would like to begin our session with a few questions about you in order to gather basic demographic background information:
What is your name?
Do you describe yourself as male or female?
How old are you?
What is your race?
How would you describe your ethnic background?
Where did you grow up?
How would you describe your socio-economic status growing up?
What is your educational background, from childhood through adulthood?
What has been your work history to date?

Great. Thank you for that very important information.
For contextual purposes, how would you describe the culture and climate surrounding education reform in the city and within the district during your time in the Aspiring Principals Program?

How would you describe the culture and climate today?

Thanks. I would now like to begin with some questions that are directed more towards you and your experience in the Aspiring Principals Program.
Please describe your experience in the Aspiring Principals Program?

How would you describe your experience in the program as it relates to your preparation for becoming a school reform leader?

How would you describe your awareness of and ability to carry out the duties of a school reform leader prior to your participation in the Aspiring Principals Program?

How would you describe your “transition” into becoming a school reform leader?

What did your growth and development look like during the program?

What have you learned about serving as a school reform leader?

How do you see yourself today as a leader of school reform?

How would you describe your growth and development towards becoming a leader of school reform since graduating from the Aspiring Principals Program?
How would you describe your role in carrying out the reform agenda for your school? The district/city?

How do you see yourself as a leader of school reform in 2-3 years?

**Closing**

I have now completed the formal interview. Is there anything additional that you would like to share or comment on? Do you have any questions that I can answer for you?

Should the need for clarification arise during the data analysis process, is it okay if I reach back out to you for a brief secondary in-person, or phone interview?

Lastly, I am providing all research participants the opportunity to submit an optional written statement about their experience transitioning into the role of a school reform leader. Similar to the interview, all written statements will be assigned a pseudonym and your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Is this something that you would be interested in completing? If so, I can provide you with instructions about the written statement once we finish here.

As we discussed, the audio recording will be transcribed and upon its completion the recording will be deleted. The transcription and my notes will be stored within a locked file cabinet within the researcher’s home office throughout the data analysis process. Once the analysis is complete, all hard copy records will be destroyed.

I would like to thank you for your time and commitment to this research study. Again, once the data has been transcribed, I will be sure to have you review the transcription for its accuracy.

Thank you.

*I will now stop the audio recording.*
Appendix E: Optional Written Statement

Directions:
Read the following prompt. Without the consultation of others, please respond to the prompt. Written statements can be of any length, but please try to keep statements under 1000 words. Statements should be typed and should not include your name. Completed statements will be picked up from you by the researcher.

Please contact the researcher with any questions or concerns. Please notify the researcher once you have completed your statement.

Researcher contact information –
Steven Lake
Cell: 216 210-3330
Email: lake.s@husky.neu.edu

Statement Prompt:
Think about your complete experience since starting the Aspiring Principals Program (from your first day in the program until today). While considering this experience, think about your intended role as a leader of school reform.

How would you describe your experience transitioning into this role?