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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT:
THE PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF A DIALOGIC PEER COACHING PROGRAM

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of
The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the degree of Doctor of Education

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April, 2018

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Michael T. Chase

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Educational Leadership

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT:
THE PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF A DIALOGIC PEER COACHING PROGRAM

Abstract

This formative program evaluation examined the perceptions of school-based leaders in a peer dialogic group coaching and discussion program in a larger school district in Western Canada. The pilot program included 14 principals and vice-principals from 12 different elementary or high schools who participated in either a discussion or coaching format to support and develop leadership and communication skills in six biweekly meetings over three months. Qualitative inductive content analysis was used to code and theme the data that resulted from semi-structured interviews and anonymous online surveys. Four main themes emerged from the data, and these themes described key elements of the coaching and discussion program that participants found important to program success. The first theme is Setting the Stage, which alludes to preconditions participants identified as critical to program success. The second is Shared Presence, which described the ways participants showed up to coaching or group discussions and how individuals contributed to group development. The third is Living the Learning, which explores the ways that participants perceived the structures that framed growth and support and how people participated in those structures. The fourth is The Value of Partnership, which describes the effects of the program for both individuals and the school district. This study found that participants perceived numerous elements that deserve careful

consideration for program improvement or continuation. The emerging model for the program was an interconnected web of elements, each deserving of attention and important to program success. Whereas the nature of a formative assessment does not provide generalizability or transferability, this study contends that leadership program developers could benefit from a deep knowledge of program elements and an open discussion of expectations and structures going into a school-based administrator leadership and communication development and support program. Key elements include the use of a robust coaching model, having an expert resource, making the program optional and ensuring that the meetings are participant-driven.

University of New England
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DEDICATION

To my wife, Nicole

This journey simply could not have happened without your tireless love and support.

Thank you for your partnership and deep understanding. I love you.

To my sons, Ben and Jonah

You waited patiently for me as I worked through this effort. Know that your maturity, patience, cheering, and love were the fuel that powered me through to completion.

You inspire me every day.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of school-based leadership, communication, and culture are second only to the effects of the classroom teacher when examining factors that affect student achievement (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2010). The school-based leadership role in education refers specifically to the efforts of principals and vice-principals in articulating a vision of a better, more effective future for the school. It also refers to the influence the principal and vice-principal use to gain the commitment of staff, students, and other stakeholders in making this vision a reality (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). The responsibilities of school-based administrators, and specifically those of the principal, have grown tremendously in both scope and complexity since the early 1980s (Aas, 2017; Bush, 2009; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood, et al., 2010). In fact, principals state that the role has become noticeably more complex and demanding since 2010. They are asked not only to be effective managers of operations and resources, but also to demonstrate curricular and assessment knowledge while setting up an environment that allows teachers to flourish and students to see increased levels of performance (Wise & Cavazos, 2017).

Context of the Study

School District X (SDX) is a publicly funded district in Western Canada where administrators are examining their leadership development as a possible step in supporting the organization's growth (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). SDX comprises a variety of schools, ranging from elementary to secondary, traditional to online, with programming for mainstream, French immersion, and special needs students. SDX is one of the largest school districts in its province and is among the highest performers in standardized

test results and graduation rates (Provincial Auditor, 2012; SDX, 2015). Enrolment increased steadily between 2010 and 2017, reflecting an early 2000s economic boom in western Canada fueled by the rise of oil and gas prices and the rapid expansion of a natural resource-based economy (Eaton, 2017). However, this boom came to an abrupt halt as the price of oil plunged dramatically in 2014, casting the region into a period of fiscal hardship necessitating drastic measures in the education sector (O'Connor, 2017). One of the many implications of this economic downturn for SDX is that professional development efforts must be implemented at little to no cost if the provincial government offers no designated funding. Leadership development is yet to be identified as a provincial priority, yet SDX leaders remain committed to this strategy as an effective direction for continued improvement as an organization.

SDX leaders are optimistic as they have identified a current gap in leadership development and look to improve the structures that support the critical role of school-based administrator. Traditionally, leadership development in the district has not been built to support and engage leaders beyond an initial orientation for newly appointed vice-principals. This orientation consisted of six meetings for new vice-principals, coupled with an optional one-week course offered before their first year in the role. Aside from these first-year offerings, no formal framework or structure for leadership development had been established (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). Malandro (2009) stated that a development structure based on a clear conceptualization of leadership, complete with a common language and indicators of success, creates greater organizational effectiveness. SDX leaders sought to create this structure, conceptualization, and language, as these elements can foster a shared understanding of leadership practice from school to school, and can also help avoid negative or inconsistent practices that could arise when leadership is not commonly understood (Cotton,

2003; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015).

In order to continue as a regional leader of student learning, and conscious of economic challenges, SDX leaders created a peer dialogic group coaching program for school-based administrators. Leaders hoped that this program would address the leadership development and support gap previously identified. The pilot program took place from September to December 2017, and data was collected in the form of meeting recordings, observational notes, exit interviews, and an anonymous online exit survey. A formative program evaluation investigating the perceived effects of this pilot effort was subsequently performed by the program initiator as part of a doctorate in educational leadership. This evaluation sought to raise participant perceptions of the program's impacts on administrators' understandings of leadership and communication. The perceptions that emerged from the program data offered windows for reflection on program improvement, and provided considerations for program effectiveness as SDX looked to address a gap in leadership support.

Statement of the Problem

Inconsistent or destructive leadership behaviors in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 (PK–12) school districts have resulted in poor communication and decreased student achievement (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). Prior to the pilot initiative, school-based development for educational leadership in SDX had no formal structure beyond initial meetings. There was no program for coaching or mentorship, so administrators' experiences surrounding development and support at the school level were largely dependent on chance and individual circumstances. Administrators may or may not have had the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion and reflection, dependent upon context, school workload, and scheduling. The lack of targeted growth and support strategies opened the doors to potential leadership inconsistencies or

misunderstandings for SDX leaders.

Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) pointed to the importance of a support structure that encouraged educators to ask questions and discuss challenges in a safe environment. Norton (2015) highlighted the importance of discussing and clarifying the competencies that are essential to good leadership in the educational setting. While SDX leaders had implemented a succession of meetings that addressed many different topics, the sessions were built as presentations with questions and answers led by superintendents. An environment led by superiors does not always provide a safe space for dialogue, as administrators may be hesitant to ask questions or may not feel comfortable exposing potential weaknesses through open discussion (Morrison, 2005). Further, there was limited opportunity for each individual to discuss their particular context in these meetings, as they often included many people and generally lasted 60 to 120 minutes. SDX leaders found that an investigation into potential alternate supports for school-based administrators represented a worthwhile endeavor.

Examining the Options

School District X (SDX) staff identified leadership and communication as goals for organizational improvement (Superintendent of Human Resources, personal communication, May 25, 2016). One leadership perspective that SDX staff considered implementing through a pilot developmental program was transformational leadership, which has proved effective for the construction of functional working relationships and has positively affected teacher job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001). However, the nature of transformational leadership is complex and contextual (Burns, 2012), making it difficult to scale up and internalize. The transformational approach refers to those leaders who engage teachers through inspiration, charismatic communication of a clear vision, and personal attention (Burns, 2012; Hattie, 2009). This style of

school leadership has produced gains in teacher engagement and satisfaction, but has not, when used exclusively, produced high-level student learning (Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Hattie, 2015; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2007). Hattie (2009) contended that instructional leadership, an approach that focuses on a climate free from distraction with clear teaching objectives and high expectations, has produced better results than transformational leadership when examining student achievement, but that the improvements were minor. As such SDX staff looked for other approaches to leadership as they contemplated the construction of a program for development and support.

Moving beyond transformational and instructional approaches to school-based leadership, Hattie (2009) and Robinson (2011) described five behaviors that have the deepest impact on student learning, which Robinson coined *student-centered leadership*. These included establishing goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and safe environment. This list borrowed from transformational and instructional leadership theories but stressed the importance of leading teacher learning and development, which had the most impact on student achievement, showing double the impact of the next best practice according to Robinson (2011) and Hattie (2009). Fullan (2014) merged all five practices as he further defined a *lead learner* approach. The primary focus of a lead learner approach is the participation of the principal or vice-principal in the leadership of teacher learning and development (Fullan, 2014). SDX staff concluded that the use of a lead learner leadership perspective offered the opportunity to discover and share the contextualized meaning of leadership practice. Fullan (2014) and Robinson (2011) offered a strong conceptualization as a base for meaningful discourse and a structure for the comparison, deconstruction, and creation of practice within different schools. The lead learner

approach to leadership, through Fullan's (2014) book *The Principal*, was chosen as a foundational reference for the creation of a pilot program aimed at supporting school-based administrators.

Choosing an Appropriate Development Format

As School District X (SDX) leaders decided on a common reference for leadership and communication development, they proceeded to investigate effective means for the use of the reference material within a professional development construct. Peer dialogic group coaching (Carteris & Smardon, 2014) represented an intriguing opportunity for the district, as it responded to many of the conditions noted by Fullan (2014) for the creation of strong school leadership cultures. This approach to leadership development offered a tool for contextual growth shared among principals and vice-principals.

Without proper support, administrators may feel overwhelmed when faced with the challenges and responsibilities of their daily duties. School-based leadership is dynamic and complex, and many of the challenges administrators face depend greatly on the immediate pressures surrounding the leader (DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014; Robertson, 2016). As such, it is important that potential support structures are highly tailored to the needs and contexts of the participants (Aguilar, 2017; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). A leader's ability to apply learning and development to situations faced on a daily basis creates an opportunity to engage in deep critical reflection (Burns, 2012; Knight, 2011; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Morrison, 2005; Webb, Neumann, & Jones 2004). Dialogic peer coaching in groups, outlined by Charteris and Smardon (2014), is a development in educational coaching that takes the key strategies of group coaching and places them within a context stripped of title and hierarchy. This coaching construct represents "a process where the teacher participants are situated as agentic co-learners and co-

constructors of knowledge in peer learning environments” (Charteris & Smardon, 2014, p. 112). As an approach to professional development, peer dialogic group coaching offers an opportunity for administrators to explore their own leadership and to co-construct an application of district expectations within their own personal contexts, allowing for deep learning and shared experiences.

Cursory professional development coupled with a lack of structured support can create inconsistency among schools when it comes to leadership. This inconsistency has the potential to negatively impact student achievement (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). As a result, this study examined the problem of loosely defined leadership and how a pilot peer dialogic group coaching program was perceived in affecting leadership and communication understandings. The perceptions of participants are useful as a topic of study if the district hopes to determine the value of this approach to leadership development moving forward. The examination of the program’s perceived ability to foster shared conceptualizations of leadership and reflective dialogue offered an opportunity to enlighten SDX’s intended growth toward a more effective school administrative culture.

Local Understanding of Coaching and Leadership

Teachers and administrators in SDX have had trouble understanding the concept of coaching as it was introduced to the district in approximately 2010. The term is often confused with athletic coaching, and was only applied through four or five designated coaches throughout the district (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). The role of coach is also often conflated with a common conception of mentorship or mixed with the role of consultant (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012), and teachers and leaders within SDX were not immune to this perception. With confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the concept of coaching

within SDX, the coaching program district leaders sought to implement had to not only be effective but also clear in its form, intent, and meaning. This study looks to provide a formative evaluation of the work as well as a deeper understanding of coaching and leadership theory through the literature review, as foundational information will be necessary for stakeholders once the dissertation is complete. The inclusion of an expansive survey of the research on coaching and leadership will allow stakeholders a clearer opportunity to improve the program and make informed decisions about development moving forward.

Purpose of the Study

Through a formative program evaluation approach, this study examined interview and survey data from the pilot peer dialogic coaching program offered by School District X (SDX) to determine the perceived effects of the program for participants in regards to their understanding of leadership and communication. The researcher took an inductive approach to the exploration of participant perceptions, using three rounds of qualitative coding and analytic memo creation to identify common perceptions organized into themes that emerged from the dataset provided by SDX. These themes offered points of consideration for SDX staff, as the aim of formative evaluation is the improvement of a program through the identification of strengths and weaknesses found within an initiative's specific setting (Patton, 2015). The perceptions of administrators who participated in the coaching effort offered district leaders the opportunity to reflect on program improvements in a time of financial pressure to provide improved educational leadership without increasing cost. The peer dialogic coaching model allowed for minimal outside training while leveraging the knowledge and skill base that previously existed within the district.

The pilot program was offered to all SDX administrators. The invitation described the

initiative as an opportunity to adopt a peer dialogic group coaching approach to their professional development, and attracted 17 volunteer principals and vice-principals. Despite the specific nature of the invitation, volunteers communicated a desire to create a discussion group in addition to the coaching groups proposed by the program initiator. As a result, one discussion group and two peer dialogic coaching groups were formed. Veteran and beginner administrators from all school contexts (K–8 and 9–12, along with specialty schools) were involved, and the superintendent of educational services responsible for research granted written consent for the use of program recordings and transcriptions, including the use of all data for publication purposes (see Appendix A). An advantage of including new and experienced administrators from differing contexts is the increased possibility of creating powerful guiding coalitions, as described by Kotter (2012).

Pressure and stress on school-based administrators (SBAs) are not unique to SDX. Hartzell, Williams, and Nelson (1995) contended that administrators are rarely prepared for the demands of the role, even upon graduation from a preparatory program. Marshall and Hooley (2006) suggested that a support system is critical to the success of administrators, particularly in the early stages of the role. With these challenges in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore the support school-based administrators perceived within a pilot peer dialogic coaching group and how this program influenced their thoughts on leadership and communication.

Research Questions

The problem of practice indicated that administrators did not have ongoing professional development and support beyond initial orientation meetings, and that this lack of support has the potential to lead to counterproductive leadership behaviors (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). This formative program evaluation responded to the problem of practice through an exploration of the

perceptions of peer coaching among SDX administrators as they related their conceptualizations of leadership and communication. At the conclusion of the program, the researcher analyzed interview and survey data in an effort to answer the following main question:

RQ₁: How did PK–12 principals and vice-principals perceive the impact of dialogic peer coaching on their communication and leadership skills?

Sub-questions that were also addressed included:

RQ₂: What was the perceived impact of the group coaching experience on the participants' application of coaching strategies in the school environment?

RQ₃: What were the different leadership and communication perceptions that emerged from dialogic peer coaching groups compared to a peer discussion group?

These questions offer participants the chance to respond directly to the problem of practice, giving them the opportunity to comment on how a pilot program meets the ever-expanding needs of principals and vice-principals looking for support and development as they encounter challenges in their daily practice.

Conceptual Framework

The role of school-based leaders is complex and has become increasingly challenging as principals and vice-principals must consider dimensions such as student socio-economic conditions, increased incidence of student mental health needs, and instructional leadership considerations (DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014; Robertson, 2016). In dealing with these challenges, school-based administrators often benefit from support and development based on clear leadership and communication expectations grounded in contextual application (Malandro, 2009; Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Transformational leadership is an effective strategy for creating deep relationships and higher engagement in school cultures

(Cotton, 2003), and creates opportunities for the communication of a common vision while modeling individual connection (Burns, 2012). Whereas this approach is effective in culture creation, it falls short of improving student learning outcomes when compared to a lead learner approach to educational leadership (Robinson, 2011). Fullan (2014) contended that a lead learner approach provided a common language and sound mindset for effective school leadership that impacted student learning, building on Robinson's (2011) data, which showed that leading teacher learning had a significant impact on student learning outcomes.

The lead learner approach focuses on collaborative professional development that seeks to engage teachers and leaders together as co-learners, building essential pedagogical capacities (Fullan, 2014). As peer dialogic group coaching offers an opportunity for school-based leaders to position themselves as co-learners (Charteris & Smardon, 2014), this model provided school based administrators (SBAs) the chance to practice a dynamic of co-constructed learning while developing a deeper shared understanding of leadership and communication. Jewett and MacPhee (2012) described dialogic coaching as an effective vehicle for shared understandings and contextualized learning for educators. Adopted for use in a leadership development pilot program, a peer dialogic coaching group using a lead learner approach as a backdrop for interactions offered a meaningful approach to lower-cost leader development.

This study examined dialogic peer group coaching and compared this approach with a discussion group through the analysis of participant perceptions. This qualitative analysis offers stakeholders a window into the perceived needs and gaps in leadership development and support within the program's context. To the extent that this study identified participants' perceptions of challenges, conceptualizations of leadership and communication, and strengths and weaknesses of the program, it created opportunities to formatively evaluate if and how these phenomena

advanced or impeded the continued growth of leadership practice in the district. This study also created opportunities for stronger bonds between schools and administrators through the deep partnerships that arose in coaching relationships, thereby offering insights to reflect upon and challenge leadership practice across the organization.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

One of the basic assumptions of this study was that school-based leaders want to improve. If participants are not interested in developing their leadership or communication abilities, a coaching program was often perceived as a waste of time and energy (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). The researcher assumed that only those administrators who had a desire to improve would volunteer to be a part of the program. A second assumption of this study was that leaders reflected on their experiences in a meaningful way and shared these reflections honestly if assured confidentiality. The researcher worked to mitigate the effects of this assumption through an opportunity for participants to review transcripts prior to analysis, thereby providing each with an opportunity to identify any information that identifies or misrepresents the individual. While this opportunity provided participants with a chance to quell concerns they may have had regarding confidentiality, it did not guarantee honesty.

As the researcher was a leader in the school district and a certified and accredited professional coach, one assumption that may have affected the study is that the evaluation of a peer coaching program had the potential to provide some insight into leader development. This assumption was addressed through rigorous qualitative analytical techniques, which included checking with participants for validity by offering them the opportunity to review transcripts before analysis and the extensive use of disproving analytic memos. Another bias was the researcher's belief that relationships lie at the heart of leadership. An alignment with the work of

Fullan (2014) could have prompted the researcher to find evidence of relationship building behaviors within the data that may not have existed. To lessen the potential effects of this perspective, the researcher used an inductive approach to qualitative analysis, with no preconceived codes or themes in mind, and applied multiple rounds of analytic memoing to directly address this predisposition.

Formative program evaluations cannot generalize, transfer, or replicate findings (Patton, 2015). They are often applied to bounded systems that exist in unique contexts. As such, they are subject to particular delimitations and limitations, and this study is no exception. One delimitation for this study was the choice of a singular coaching program within School District X. The researcher was an employee of SDX and had limited time for the study due to the prescribed length of a cohort-based doctoral program and the demands of full-time employment. As such, the study was conducted using a single bounded system.

One limitation of the study was that it focused on perceptions, and as such could not determine if the coaching intervention had any effect on actual leadership practice. While participants perceived an important effect on leadership, this cannot be verified as a program outcome through the examination of perceptions. A second limitation of the study was that participation in the program was optional. While participants saw this as a strength of the program, it limited the study's ability to determine if coaching is effective because it has inherent value or if coaching was effective simply because participants wanted to improve their practice prior to participation.

Significance

There are many potential practical applications of a greater understanding of administrator peer coaching. To the extent that it raised participant perceptions, the investigation

of peer coaching provided developmental considerations for programs in other contexts outside of Western Canada. Coaching is an effective tool for administrator support (Lovely, 2004), and provides opportunities for trust if conducted within the parameters of an accepted coaching model (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Lead learner leadership was cited as an effective approach to educational leadership (Fullan, 2014; Hattie, 2009; Robinson, 2010), and can affect teacher job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001). The exploration of administrator perceptions as participants in a peer coaching program may impact current understanding of administrator engagement in professional development within SDX. Evaluation of the peer dialogic group coaching model as it relates to leadership and communication perceptions may shape future directions of formal leadership development in SDX, potentially providing a common language and understanding of leadership.

This study also addressed a gap in the current literature. Studies have historically focused on group dialogic coaching among teachers and health care administrators, and group peer coaching for school-based administrators has focused on groups with designated coach leaders (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Alro & Dahl, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Flückiger et al., 2017; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012; Nicolaidou et al., 2017). This study examined a leaderless peer dialogic group coaching process strictly from a school-based administrator perspective, thus offering a unique contribution to the school leadership literature.

Definition of Terms

Lead learner leadership: For the purposes of this study, lead learner leadership is defined by Fullan (2014). He stated that the term learning leader or lead learner is not new, and clarified the term as “one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis” (p. 7). The key authors in lead learner theory are Fullan (2014) and Robinson

(2011), with Fullan (2014) having provided the most comprehensive description of the concept and potential applications for educational leaders. Fullan (2012) included the description of the leadership intention as well as behaviors that transformational leaders exhibit.

Recognized coaching model: For the purposes of this study, a recognized peer coaching model is described as one that employs the elements of the GROW model outlined by van Nieuwerburgh (2012). The GROW model includes exploration of a goal, reality for the individual, options, and a way forward. This model was further explained and supported by the local professionally trained coach involved in the program. Specifically, the GUIDE coaching model (Ring, 2010) was the model of choice for this program, as it included all essential elements of the GROW model (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). All participants but one had prior training with the GUIDE model (Ring, 2010).

Coaching: For the purposes of this study, coaching is defined as a partnership with coachees that engages in a thought-provoking and creative process and inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. The International Coach Federation (ICF) stated:

Within this partnership, coaches seek to honor the client as the expert in his or her life and assume the belief that every client is creative, resourceful and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:

- Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve
- Encourage client self-discovery
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
- Hold the client responsible and accountable

This process helps clients dramatically improve their outlook on work and life, while improving their leadership skills and unlocking their potential. (International Coach Federation, 2017, Coaching FAQs, para.1)

This definition from the ICF is accepted worldwide as a definition for coaching across multiple domains, including, executive, personal, and educational coaching.

Peer coaching: Peer coaching is distinct from coaching in general as it is defined as group work consisting of two or more participants within the same working level or community, where all participants are encouraged to engage in the coaching process (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). An agreement to adhere to the aforementioned GUIDE coaching model (Ring, 2010) framed group interactions in this pilot program. The program involved only principals and vice-principals as members of the same working level.

Dialogic peer coaching: Charteris and Smardon (2014) described peer dialogic group coaching as “a process where the teacher participants are situated as agentic co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge in peer learning environments” (p. 112). This definition took the previously mentioned aspects of peer coaching and placed them within a context stripped of title and hierarchy. All members of the coaching groups took turns as both co-coach or coachee at various points in the program

Conclusion

Administrator leadership is an important factor in the success of any school (Cotton, 2003), and the support of such leaders is critical in establishing long-term success as a school district (Fullan, 2014). While many studies have looked at leadership as a whole (Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005), few have focused primarily on dialogic peer coaching and the self-perceived effects for school-based administrators. SDX has piloted a program that sought to

support school-based leaders through a collegial approach, and an examination of participant perceptions represents a meaningful step in evaluating program effects.

Transformational leaders engage in behaviors that include communicating high expectations, using strong expressive forms of communication, modeling behaviors, and building identification with group members (Yukl, 2010), and these behaviors have shown positive effects on teacher engagement (Cotton, 2003). Lead learners (Fullan, 2014) incorporate the benefits of transformational leadership and use these attributes as they practice the behavior of partnership in learning. This practice guides the professional discourse between educators toward a meaningful exchange centered on the business of teaching and learning (Fullan, 2014). Peer dialogic coaching in groups offers a structure that positions leaders as partners in learning where they can engage in a co-construction of leadership understanding while practicing the collegial approach to collaboration outlined in the lead learner perspective (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Fullan, 2014). If a dialogic approach to group coaching fosters these leadership behaviors, students stand to benefit as leaders and teachers focus their gaze more intently on successful pedagogy and work more closely together in the development of strategies that produce greater learning outcomes (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). An understanding of the practices embedded in the peer dialogic group coaching approach offered SDX the opportunity to refine and focus their efforts to serve students and to continue as the regional leader in learning outcomes.

SDX leaders are not unique in their struggle to provide meaningful professional development at minimal cost. By embedding a coaching program that focused on the perceptions of administrators and the challenges that they encounter together, not only did the district leaders gain the potential for deeply meaningful leadership development, they also provided the opportunity for the development of interschool functional relationships. In exploring the

practices of different buildings, all administrators gained the potential to view their sites from a different perspective. This study explored the self-perceived developmental experiences of administrators, further informing the usefulness and applicability of such a program for School District X.

Chapter two of this study will explore the literature on coaching and leadership for SBAs, tying the body of research to the study's conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Chapter three will discuss the methodology of the research, and outline the elements of qualitative analysis applicable to this investigation. The site will be examined and described, and a complete discussion of methods, conclusions, significance, and limitations will be provided. Chapter four will present results, outlining the analysis before offering themes that emerged from the data and accounting for any discrepancies. Finally, chapter five will interpret the findings of the study and will offer implications of the findings for individuals, the organization, and stakeholders. This final chapter will give recommendations for action and further study before concluding with an articulation of the significance of the work.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of school leaders has historically grown in complexity and scope, creating new challenges as principals and vice principals respond to the ever-increasing needs of students (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2010). With this evolution came a greater appreciation for the need to support both new and experienced leaders (Goff, Guthrie, Goldring & Bickman, 2014; Retna, 2015). Coaching remains an effective tool for the development and support of school-based administrators (SBAs), and grew dramatically in both practical application and academic research since the turn of the millennium (Aguilar, 2017; Flückiger et al., 2017; Lindle et al., 2017). This development in the field of educational leadership offered a rich opportunity for critical reflection, deep learning, and contextual application of knowledge in the school environment (Charteris & Smardon, 2014).

School District X (SDX) in Western Canada identified improved leadership and communication as organizational goals (Superintendent of Human Resources, personal communication, May 25, 2016). SDX sought to develop lead learners, as this style of leadership was deemed more effective for improving student outcomes compared to other leadership styles (Fullan, 2014; Hattie, 2009; Robinson, 2011). Within the context of PK–12 education, less effective styles included transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and instructional leadership. Although these are important strategies that have helped in many circumstances, used singularly they have led to decreased teacher satisfaction, reduced impact on student achievement, or possible loss of valuable professional relationships (Bogler, 2001; Hattie, 2009; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015).

Effective leadership has greatly impacted student success, even if those effects have been

indirect in nature. Cotton (2003) stated, “Research from the 1970s and early 1980s shows that strong administrative leadership, ...is a key component of schools with high student achievement” (p. 67). The support of both new and experienced leaders was critical in establishing long-term success as a school district (Silver, Lochmiller, Copland, & Tripps, 2009; Youngs & Carno, 2015). SDX in Western Canada was besieged by educational funding cuts and calls for fiscal restraint (Graham, 2017). This politically charged context increased stress for principals and vice-principals, or school-based administrators (SBAs) who already experienced many challenges in a dynamic and fast-paced environment. The economic environment in Western Canada dictates that professional development efforts be cost-effective or free, and SDX staff identified their internal leadership capital as a potential resource for supporting and developing leaders, as all SBAs had a base level of coach training. Building on a teacher development coaching model previously implemented in the district, SDX looked to peer dialogic group coaching as a means to support and develop their principals and vice principals.

In order to support and contextualize the questions outlined in chapter one, this literature review focuses on the important factors in the academic and professional body of knowledge pertaining to coaching and leadership in education. This study takes a wide approach in addressing the leadership and coaching literature, as part of the problem of practice for SDX is a lack of common understanding of leadership and little knowledge or experience of coaching. The review will outline transformational and student-centered leadership perspectives, as these approaches formed the foundation for the lead learner approach (Burns; 2012, Fullan, 2014; Robinson, 2011). The review will also examine literature on coaching that defines the concept, separates it from other forms of professional development, and distinguishes the different models and forms that coaching can take. It will examine theories that underpin most coaching models,

as an outline of these contributory theories may provide a deeper understanding for stakeholders within SDX. As a formative program review serves to inform program improvement, and is intended to be used to create deeper understandings of the program in question (Patton, 2015), this literature review was constructed not only to ground the researcher in the relevant literature but also to accompany the study's findings as a useful outline of coaching and leadership concepts. This review seeks to offer SDX an overview of the coaching and leadership research that can serve as a resource for its efforts to improve professional development for principals and vice-principals.

The chapter begins with a description of the search methodology used for the literature review and continues with a conceptual framework outlining the conditions leading to the need for a study on dialogic peer coaching for leadership development (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). It then reviews the current research on coaching and its applications in education and briefly examines the history of coaching in education. It outlines the pivotal underlying theories of coaching, and positions coaching within the larger scope of professional development in education. The focus then narrows to examine the forms, models, and structures of coaching as described in the research, and discusses the key components of the coaching relationship, with a special focus on partnership. The review will also examine the greater body of research on educational leadership, narrowing to a focus on student-centered leadership and lead learner leadership (Fulan, 2014; Robinson, 2011).

Search Methodology

This literature review focuses on coaching in education, dialogic peer coaching, school-based educational leadership, and lead learner approach through a detailed search of educational databases (ProQuest Central, ProQuest Education, EBSCO, ERIC, Academic Complete, and

LexisNexis). The researcher used search terms such as *principal peer coaching*, *collaborative coaching AND principal*, *peer leadership coaching AND principal NOT executive*, *dialogic coaching*, *lead learner*, *principal leadership development*, and *principal leadership coaching* among others. The majority of the publications cited in this work were written in the past ten years, with exceptions representing important contributions that laid the groundwork for key coaching discussions. As an example, Bloom, Castanga, Moir, and Warren (2005) described the concept of blended coaching thoroughly and are widely cited as the guiding text for many coaching program development models. Bogler (2001) connected leadership styles to teacher job satisfaction, an important qualifier for the justification of leadership research among school-based administrators (SBAs). Other older works represented some of the early directions of leadership or coaching research that impacted the field. The review includes trade publications, books, and dissertations that were found by examining the references of academic works and through discussions with colleagues in the field. The end result of the data collection, however, heavily favored peer-reviewed journal articles. Sources including how-to books, coaching model descriptions, and op-ed pieces describing and sometimes claiming effectiveness or failure did not meet the same standard as high-quality qualitative or quantitative research grounded in sound methodology. Those trade publications that were included provided a practical working perspective on coaching in the field of education, useful as companions to peer-reviewed research and evidence of theory in practice.

The chapter examines dialogic peer coaching and discusses its application to contextual leadership development, and then turns to leadership in education, including a definition, brief history, and description of the key perspectives of leadership found in the literature. The chapter then examines key theories that contribute to the lead learner perspective, along with a

description of their evolution and connections to practice. The attention then turns to lead learner theory specifically and its application in school settings. The review culminates with a synthesis of the research on lead learner theory and dialogic peer coaching, with an exploration of how the two theories complement each other.

Conceptual Framework

Pressure and stress on school-based administrators abound. Hartzell, Williams, and Nelson (1995) contended that administrators are rarely prepared for the demands of the role, even when given preparatory training. Marshall and Hooley (2006) suggested that a support system is critical to the success of administrators, particularly in the early stages of the role. Despite the fact that Fullan (2007) stressed the importance of relationships in quality leadership, recent leadership development strategies for School District X (SDX) consisted mainly of in-services and workshops (Superintendent of Human Resources, personal communication, December 9, 2016), which provided little opportunity for the sharing of experiences and the building of relationships, much less a co-created understanding of leadership as it applies to the district as a whole. Prior to the coaching pilot initiative, SDX did not have a model for leadership development, and as such lacked a consistent language and conceptualization of quality practice. Malandro (2009) stated that without clear and consistent language and expectations, meaningful leadership is difficult if not impossible.

Leadership

School District X (SDX) leaders identified the development of a common language and conceptualization of leadership as an avenue for continued organizational improvement (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). As such, a brief description of contemporary leadership approaches aids the formative evaluation of a leadership

development program. The review of the leadership literature that follows serves not only to inform this study but also to offer SDX potential points for consideration as staff explore leadership professional development.

The discussion surrounding quality educational leadership has described transformational leadership as more effective than transactional leadership (Bogler, 2001; Hauserman & Stick, 2013). In defining transformational leadership, Hattie (2009) briefly outlined the commonly understood application of transformational leadership in education, but argued that this approach used exclusively cannot produce the same learning outcomes as instructional leadership. He stated:

There are at least two major forms of leadership: instructional leadership and transformational leadership. Instructional leadership refers to those principals who have their major focus on creating a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for teachers and students.

Transformational leadership refers to those principals who engage with their teaching staff in ways that inspire them to new levels of energy, commitment, and moral purpose such that they work collaboratively to overcome challenges and reach ambitious goals.

The evidence from the meta-analyses supports the power of the former over the latter in terms of the effects on student outcomes. (Kindle Location 1949)

This work, along with that of Robinson (2011), shifted the focus of school leadership research into an era where student outcomes became the center of the discussion. A key contention of this newer discussion was that when looking at student outcomes, instructional leadership had much less impact on success than student-centered leadership. Robinson (2011) described a student-centered approach to educational leadership as one that puts learning outcomes at the heart of

leadership efforts. Hattie (2009), Robinson (2011) and Fullan (2014) all referenced the student-centered leadership approach when looking for the most impactful leadership strategies for affecting student learning, with special emphasis on one aspect of the student-centered approach; being a lead learner. The lead learner perspective was described as a commitment from a school-based leader to position him- or herself as a participant in professional learning, working alongside teachers to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with the new directives or strategies being explored (Fullan, 2014; Robinson, 2011).

Hattie (2009) and Robinson (2011) described leading teacher learning and development (lead learner approach) as one of five behaviors that have the deepest impact on student learning, which as a group Robinson (2011) called a student-centered leadership approach. Student-centered leadership includes establishing goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and safe environment (Robinson, 2011). This list considered prior leadership theories but elaborated by stressing the importance of leading teacher learning and development, a strategy that showed double the impact on student learning compared to the next best practice according to Robinson (2011). Fullan (2014) wove all five practices of student-centered leadership together as he focused on the lead learner approach. He stated that while the primary goal of the lead learner perspective is the participation of the principal or SBAs in the leadership of teacher learning and development, the four other practices cannot be ignored. Fullan (2014) also stated that the term learning leader or lead learner is not new, but clarified the term as “one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis” (p. 7). This narrowing of perspective from student-centered learning as a whole to the perspective of lead learner offered administrators the opportunity to choose a very powerful aspect of the larger leadership theory

without losing sight of the fact that it is an important part of the whole. The lead learner approach also offered SBAs a powerful tool for insight into the most effective practice within the larger concept of school leadership. In his discussion of lead learner leadership, Fullan (2014) resisted any distinction between managers and leaders as his contention was that one must precede the other. Leaders must let go of the false delineation between manager and leader, as Fullan (2014) contended that any leader who fails to first manage school logistics and administration will never have the opportunity to address true leadership as they struggle with basic functions.

In order for administrator support and development to be effective, or for any leadership theory to be practically applicable, potential support structures should be highly tailored to the needs and contexts of the participants (Aguilar, 2017; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). The ability to apply learning and development to situations faced on a daily basis allowed administrators the ability to engage in deep critical reflection (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Morrison, 2005; Webb, Neumann, & Jones 2004). Not only would a leadership development program need a solid resource to guide the leadership conversation—such as lead learner theory—but it should also have a development construct that can answer to the contextual needs of the learner, immediately applicable in the learner’s leadership reality and allowing the learner an opportunity to reflect on praxis as it relates to the chosen leadership theory (Mangin, 2014). Knight (2011) contended that coaching is a development structure that can be applied in context with short turnaround times while providing rich opportunities for reflection.

Coaching

Coaching is an effective tool for administrator support (Lovely, 2004), and is conducive to meaningful development for school-based leadership if conducted within the parameters of an

accepted coaching model (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). There are many different models and constructs that can guide a quality coaching relationship. Coaching can occur in dyadic (one coach and one coachee), group (one coach, and two or more coachees), or peer (colleagues that coach each other) constructs (Wise & Cavalos, 2017). The models for coaching exchanges include frameworks such as GROW, which stands for Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward, and GROUP which stands for Goal, Reality, Options, Understanding others, Perform (Brown & Grant, 2010). These constructs describe the roles within the coaching relationship while the models describe the process undertaken during the coaching process. Each construct and model serves a different purpose, and a key component of all functional coaching arrangements is the identification of the construct and model being used as an agreement among all parties (Knight, 2007).

The pilot coaching program in SDX required participants to understand that coaching can take different forms and use different models, as the proposed peer dialogic group format for the initiative was new to all leaders involved. As SDX was also new to coaching as a general concept, a clear outline of the underlying theories that contribute to coaching is essential as part of a dissertation seeking to perform a formative program evaluation. A basic understanding of the theories creates an opportunity for the dissertation to be used for program improvement, as suggested by Patton (2015).

Theories that Influence the Study of Coaching

Coaching within School Division X (SDX) has often been misunderstood or confused with other forms of professional development (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). This is not unique to SDX as educators sometimes take on a role that has been described as coaching with little or no coach training (Knight, 2011). As such, an

examination of the foundational theories that underpin coaching serves to illuminate the function and practice of coaching for administrators in SDX.

Coaching has been examined from many different perspectives, and it is difficult to deeply understand coaching as a concept without the consideration of a number of key theories. Wise & Cavazos (2017) offer a comprehensive look at the numerous theories that inform coaching. They point to Emotional Intelligence, Adult Transformative Learning Theory, Multi-dimensional Executive Coaching, and Appreciative Inquiry as contributors to the theoretical analysis of coaching. After considering these theories, Wise and Cavazos chose to focus on what they deem to be the theories that bring the most to bear on school leadership coaching, a perspective that would also be appropriate for the study of dialogic peer coaching (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). These theories are social cognitive theory, zone of proximal development, and single- and double-loop learning. These theories have provided the groundwork for the development of coaching as a tool for self-reflection and development. All three theories represent essential understandings that participants must grasp if they are to engage effectively with the coaching process (Wise & Cavazos, 2017).

Social cognitive theory. The first theory that Wise and Cavazos (2017) outlined is Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which discusses four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological states. Wise and Cavazos connect Bandura's theory with Hargrove's (2008) proposition that a leadership coach serves mainly "(a) to expand an individual's or group's capacity to obtain desired results and (b) to facilitate individual or organizational development" (as cited in Wise & Cavazos, 2017, p. 224). The connection is exemplified through the following example:

The coach models for the principal appropriate ways to approach issues and to select and

carry out actions. As the principal develops these skills, the coach offers continual feedback and motivation for the principal's progress and accomplishments (social persuasion). As skills increase, the principal experiences success (mastery experiences) and higher sense of self-efficacy. The principal with a higher sense of self-efficacy will tend to view physiological factors, such as nervousness before addressing a faculty meeting, as normal and not an indication of a lack of ability. (Wise & Cavazos, 2017, p. 224)

Wise and Cavazos contended that the creation or development of self-efficacy is a distinctive aspect of the coach approach, a sentiment that is echoed by many other scholars (Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2007, van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). If a coachee does not develop greater self-efficacy as an educator, the potential of coaching remains unlocked (Knight, 2007).

Zone of Proximal Development. Lindle et al. (2017) and Aas and Flückiger (2016) joined Wise and Cavazos (2017) in expanding the theoretical model of social cognitive theory to include the consideration of Vygostky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The examination of coaching from this perspective makes clear the importance a coaching relationship plays in scaffolding a school leader out of their comfort zone into goals that are attainable but require the coachee to stretch their capacity in order to fully engage (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Lindle et al., 2017; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). This process of challenging coachees to set achievable goals while partnering with coaches in the action planning to attain these goals is a key component of the coaching process, and is mentioned frequently as a key outcome of the coaching partnership (Knight, 2011). This use of challenging but achievable goals to move a coachee towards greater efficacy and providing accountability for this development is what distinguishes coaching from other forms of professional development (van

Nieuwerburgh, 2012).

Single and double loop learning. Single and double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978) is another theory that was widely referenced in the literature (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Brown & Grant, 2010; Ezaki, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Tosey, 2011; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Summarized by Brown and Grant (2010), single loop learning is about making small adjustments—seeing a problem and fixing it immediately, and double loop learning is about altering mental models and thinking. Double loop learning requires a learner to see the problem and reflect on the assumptions or influences that led the problem solver to certain set of options, thereby creating new options (Brown & Grant, 2010). This description harmonized with Wise and Cavazos’s (2017) description of double loop learning, where they state that it “questions the governing variables involved and comes into play for principals who seek long-term solutions by reframing the thinking process of decision-making” (p. 225). This type of learning, where assumptions are questioned, biases are confronted, and new models are created for interpreting the individual’s surroundings, is key to deep and meaningful professional growth, and coaching is an excellent vehicle for the promotion of such learning (Robertson, 2016).

The impact of these three major theories was to establish that coaching is effective in promoting self-efficacy, pushes participants to attain challenging but reasonable goals, and promotes deep reflexive thinking that in turn impacts school leadership (Aas 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Brown & Grant, 2010; Ezaki, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Tosey, 2011, Wise & Cavazos, 2017). The theoretical frameworks applied in the research demonstrated that coaching as a concept was robust and dependable, and that positive outcomes were the norm when it was applied by qualified coaches who used an established model to build trust and partnership (Knight, 2011; Johnson, Leibowitz, & Perret, 2017; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012).

Through many different perspectives and in many different contexts, coaching was valued and appreciated (James-Ward, 2011, 2012; Retna, 2015).

Dialogic Peer Coaching in Groups

Dialogic peer coaching in groups, described by Charteris and Smardon (2014), is a model for educational coaching that takes the key aspects of the group coaching construct and places them within a context stripped of title and hierarchy. Charteris and Smardon (2014) described dialogic peer coaching in groups as

. . . a system of reciprocal learning and support (Zepeda et al., 2013). In this research the term “dialogic peer coaching” is used to describe a process where the teacher participants are situated as agentic co-learners and co-constructers of knowledge in peer learning environments. (p. 112)

This model for educational coaching placed the participants as co-coaches in a collaborative effort. The possibilities for co-construction of knowledge and understanding arose from the shared dialogue guided by coaching principles (Charteris & Smardon, 2014).

Bringing Lead Learner Theory and Dialogic Group Coaching Together

The program developed by SDX staff used lead learner theory as a resource for leadership conceptualization within the construct of peer dialogic group coaching. By embedding a coaching program that focuses on the daily experiences of administrators and the challenges that they encounter together, district leadership gained the potential for deeply meaningful leadership development and provided the opportunity for the development of interschool functional relationships. In exploring the practices of different buildings, administrators realized an opportunity to view their sites from a different perspective. This sharing of practice offered many new options for school success.

A deeper understanding of the perceptions and behaviors of administrators who participated in a dialogic peer coaching group created an opportunity to clarify, operationalize, and potentially scale-up this approach to leadership development. In a time of financial pressure to provide evolving educational services without increasing cost, the peer coaching model allowed for a minimal amount of outside training while leveraging the corporate knowledge and skill base that exists within the district. The lead learner approach offered an effective backdrop to such a program, providing a common language and basis for critical reflection within a group of professionals seeking to develop their leadership skills. This combination of coaching and leadership development opens new doors for SDX.

Dialogic peer coaching, although new and lacking extensive research, revealed promise as a leadership development construct (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014). Furthermore, as leadership coaching in general at the PK–12 school administrative level is still in its infancy (Flückiger et al., 2017), an exploration of the perceptions of principals and vice-principals involved in a dialogic peer coaching leadership program offered insight into a developmental strategy that is potentially more cost-effective and contextualized than the traditional dyadic coaching or professional coach scenarios. As all but one of the administrators in SDX engaged coach training prior to the pilot program, a study of this type of coaching offered insights into the value of organizational coach development. It also leveraged concepts such as deep contextualization (Reed, 2010), benefits of peer coaching (Jewett & MacPhee, 2012), partnership principles (Knight, 2007, van Niewerburgh, 2012), common understanding of leadership practice (Aas & Vavik, 2015), and dialogic emergence of leadership identity (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). It also presented a way to improve the implementation of leadership practices beyond coaching experiences (Goff, Guthrie, Goldring, & Bickman, 2014).

Flückiger et al. (2017) and Lindle et al. (2017) identified a gap in the current literature surrounding group coaching for school leadership. A study on the perceptions and experiences of school leaders engaged in dialogic group leadership coaching offers a contribution to this body of educational research.

Coaching in Education

Coaching was a new concept for School Division X (SDX). The district had used coaches for approximately six years prior to the pilot study, and these coaches were primarily instructional coaches who had little to no coach training. As such, a clear definition of coaching in education and a distinction between the different types, models, and formats of coaching in education offers important information to stakeholders and program participants within SDX. The research has revealed many aspects of coaching that must be considered for quality coaching discussions (Knight, 2011), and an overview of these aspects also serves to inform practitioners within the SDX.

Most leaders in SDX prior to district coach training had little understanding of the concept of coaching. “In its simplest form, coaching is the act of helping others to perform better” (Noble, 2012, p. 32). While this definition of coaching may seem simplistic, it represents the essence of coaching as a developmental strategy, and the critical intention that guides functional coaching relationships. Coaching exists in many forms and serves many purposes within the realm of education. Coaching was used to teach students coping, study, stress reduction and social skills, and to enhance teachers’ instructional skills (Knight, 2007). Among other uses, coaching was applied as a means for habit identification and the development of emotional intelligence (Purcek, 2014), and was used to develop and support leadership in school settings (Bloom et al., 2005). The coach approach supported the acquisition and execution of

teaching strategies (Zepeda, Parylo, & Ilgan, 2013), and was used to bolster performance feedback in late-career educators (Huston & Weaver, 2008).

For the purposes of this literature review, coaching is defined as a partnership that seeks to engage coachees in a thought-provoking and creative process and inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Within this partnership, coaches work to honor the client as the expert in his or her life and assume the belief that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:

- Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve
- Encourage client self-discovery
- Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
- Hold the client responsible and accountable

This process helps [coachees] dramatically improve their outlook on work and life, while improving their leadership skills and unlocking their potential. (International Coach Federation, 2017, Coaching FAQs, para.1)

The use of coaching as a means for leadership development within education has the potential to create opportunities for deep reflection, powerful courses of action, and meaningful change in practice for those who guide the learning of students (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Fullan, 2014; Robertson, 2009; Wise & Jacobo, 2010).

History of Coaching in Education

To understand coaching within the contemporary educational environment, this review examined the history of coaching as it moved from the worlds of sports and business into daily educational practice. Coaching as a topic of study dates back to the 1970s when it was identified as a well-established means to enhance sports performance (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). As a tool

for personal or professional development outside of sports, the research was thin until the 1980s. In an annotated bibliography of coaching research from 1937 to January 2011, Grant (2011) identified only 17 studies on coaching or coaching related phenomena up until the year 1980. From 1980 to 2000, he reported 33 studies, but from 2000 to 2011 the literature exploded with work on coaching, with most of the work taking a qualitative approach (Grant, 2011).

The early research on coaching is rooted in psychology (Close, 2013) rather than social research, and early work often referred to a cognitive perspective for the analysis of coaching and its effectiveness (Cerni, Curtis, & Colmar, 2010). Coaching moved from the field of athletics to the business world in the 1980s, with 25–40% of American Fortune 500 companies regularly using coaching as a means for organizational and personal improvement as of 2007 (Brown & Grant, 2010). The rapid expansion of the academic literature on coaching offers insights into the effectiveness of the strategy for personal and professional development.

Coaching in education is a distinct part of the general coaching literature, and while the history of coaching is short in general, it is even shorter when looking at educational coaching in particular (Aas & Vavik, 2015; van Niewerbergh, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2013). The educational coaching literature began in earnest at the beginning of the 21st century, just as the practice started to carve a foothold in the professional development landscape (van Niewerburgh, 2012). While the research was relatively new, it showed great promise (Loving, 2011). Coaching as a strategy for development and support in education showed positive effects in learning outcomes, teacher and administrator self-efficacy, application of teaching strategies, and sustained application of leadership behaviors (Bossi, 2008; Knight, 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2007). Coaching was described as a positive experience by coaches and coachees in most of the literature (James-Ward, 2011, 2012; Retna, 2015), and was identified as a powerful strategy for

encouraging self-reflection and critical examination of practice (Bossi, 2008). Coaching also showed promise for capacity building among teachers and leaders (Mangin, 2014; Huston & Weaver, 2008, Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013), and demonstrated lasting effects, even beyond the coaching relationship (Loving, 2011). Because coaching as a concept was relatively new to SDX, the literature outlining the historical effects of coaching serves to establish legitimacy among those who doubt the strategy but respect educational research.

Coaching within the Professional Development Landscape

School Division X (SDX) staff sought to construct a development model that addresses leadership and communication development (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). One of the challenges in implementing this model within SDX was a nascent understanding of the concept of coaching. As such, this section of the literature review positions coaching within the context of other more traditional development constructs, and continues with the benefits and opportunities that coaching provides.

Coaching is but one tool within the world of educational professional development; competing and cooperating with traditional in-service, group informational sessions, workshops, and formal developmental programs (Carraway & Young, 2014; Huff, Preston, & Goldring, 2013; Retna, 2015). Looking at the impact of different professional development delivery systems, Kretlow, Wood, and Cooke (2009) found that in-service alone was effective for a moderate impact on the application of teaching strategies in kindergarten classrooms, and that coaching paired with in-service had significantly greater effects on the application of learning strategies. This finding is demonstrative of the larger contention of coaching research. Simply stated, coaching is not a cure-all or replacement for more traditional professional development strategies such as workshops, conferences, and in-services, but rather an effective means for

contextualizing these development strategies within the daily practice of teachers, providing support and helping to connect theory and practice (Kretlow et al., 2009; Flückiger et al., 2017).

The purpose of coaching within the professional development arena of education is professional learning, and as such its ability to provide meaningful feedback renders it highly effective (Flückiger et al., 2017). The coaching relationship addresses real time problems and meets the needs of adult learners, particularly those who are in fast-paced leadership positions (Robertson, 2016). In fact, Bush (2009) argued that leadership preparation and support are moral obligations, as classroom teacher training and experience are no longer sufficient for the demands of school leadership. Bush (2009) continued, noting that coaching is in the ascendancy because it answers to the need for skill development and safe reflection, but that it must also be “integral to the wider learning process” (p. 379) of professional development. Coaching was not seen as a replacement for traditional professional development, but rather as an important companion to these efforts to achieve maximum meaning, contextualization, and application.

Coaching Compared to Mentoring or Athletic Coaching

Stakeholders in School District X have expressed challenges distinguishing among coaching, athletic coaching, and mentoring. This distinct separation between coaching and mentoring was often lacking in the literature as well, which at times used coaching and mentoring interchangeably (Aas & Vavik, 2015; James-Ward, 2011; Loving, 2011; Purcek, 2014). While coaching was effective in a variety of circumstances, including leadership development, teaching improvement, and student learning outcomes (Mangin, 2014), “It should be acknowledged that there is confusion between the terms “coaching and mentoring”. This tension is evident in the literature . . . and it is especially prevalent within education” (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p. 13). Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) distinguished between coaching and

mentoring when he stated that coaching focuses on asking about the needs of the client or coachee and partnering with them on their chosen path for development, while mentoring is more about the passing of knowledge.

Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) stated that coaching is more formal than mentoring, employing ground rules and often a contract or formal agreement, and is shorter-term than mentoring. He also contended that coaching focuses on performance through reflection on a specific challenge rather than mentoring's longer-term career development. While coaching is more general in nature, mentoring focuses more on specific knowledge inherent to the coachee's working context (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). This clear separation between coaching and mentoring is blurred somewhat in other literature, which used coaching and mentoring interchangeably, or placed them on a continuum for the identification of development strategies (Aas & Vavik, 2015; James-Ward, 2011; Loving, 2011; Purcek, 2014). Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) finished his argument by stating that "at the same time, many skills are similar.

Coaches and mentors need to be good listeners. They need to ask powerful questions. Often, both will encourage their clients to pursue their ambitions and aspirations" (p. 16). In moving past the distinction in practical application, he suggests that "rather than getting trapped in the debate over terminology, perhaps it would be more helpful to consider coaching and mentoring along a spectrum" (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p. 16). Many scholars in the literature who have addressed the differences in coaching and mentoring strategies shared this perspective (Knight, 2011; Lindle et al., 2017).

Coaching is distinct from athletic coaching, as an athletic coach instructs and applies strategy to team member activities whereas a coach (either executive or educational) explores current challenges and partners with the coachee (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Another important

distinction when examining the coach relationship is that it is a true partnership, with no hierarchical power structure in place; which would differ from sports coaching or mentorship (Knight, 2007). A final distinction is that an athletic coach working with a team is coaching the group to achieve a common goal or purpose, a group coach within education (or leadership in general) may work with the group to pursue individual goals using the group as leverage for feedback, support, accountability, and performance (Brown & Grant, 2010). The key distinctions among mentoring, coaching, and athletic coaching serve as clarifiers, as the term coaching is familiar to educators who have experienced athletic coaching and mentoring through the course of their careers, particularly within SDX. The differentiation among terms is important if educators and stakeholders in SDX are to grasp the key intentions and processes of the coaching relationship.

Overall Effectiveness of Coaching

Coaching was widely lauded as effective in building self-efficacy, greater awareness, team development, leadership development, deeper awareness and understanding of organizational goals, and application of new skills (Bossi, 2008; Petti, 2010; Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013). Specific to education, coaching was extremely effective in the contextualization of professional learning, acquisition and application of teaching strategies, leadership reflection in schools, and affecting school culture, among other benefits (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Kretlow, Wood, & Cooke, 2009; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Coaching is not without its detractors, who claim there is little benefit from coaching, particularly when measuring leadership performance in the business world (Moen & Federici, 2012), but this flaw can be attributed to a lack of clarity or social misunderstanding surrounding mutually agreed upon roles in a coaching relationship (Zepeda et al., 2013). A key finding in the literature was that coaching can have very powerful

positive effects for the coach as well as for the coachee (Netolicky, 2016). The consensus in the literature was that coaching is appreciated both by coaches and coachees and that the empirical results of coaching, though fewer in numbers as compared to qualitative efforts, point to the conclusion that coaching has positive effects (Killion, 2017).

Criteria for Coaching Success

The body of research indicated that there are a number of conditions that coaching relationships must fulfill in order to be successful (Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2007; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Many of the conditions that comprise a coaching relationship were new for participants in School Division X, and treatment of these conditions within this literature review allows for a more practical application of the formative program evaluation for stakeholders. As a formative evaluation seeks to offer feedback on program benefits and drawbacks (Patton, 2015), a close look at essential elements described in the literature allows decision makers a reference point from which to plan future program implementation.

A primary condition is that coaching must create and support leadership development and adult learning within the lived context of the coachee (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Aguilar, 2017; Brown & Tobias, 2013; Mangin 2014; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Even when the coaching relationship is very casual or lacking the use of a model, coaching can still achieve limited effectiveness if it is clearly related to the lived context of the participants (Brown & Tobis, 2013). Topics for coaching sessions must be drawn from current lived experiences, usually based in data, and the session must help the coachee to take action in the area that was identified as an immediate concern (Knight, 2011). Effective coaching takes the immediate context of a coachee's experience as the primary fuel for action and development (Knight, 2007). Although most program participants in SDX had coach training, there was little discussion of the different

essential elements inherent to coaching success, and participants expressed a lack of understanding of most critical elements at the outset of the coaching program. An examination of the research that outlined these criteria serve to enlighten the understanding of coaching, which informs a study of SDX program participants' perceptions of the coaching experience.

Understanding and Agreeing on Roles

Another key aspect of successful coaching programs is that the coaching relationship must have clear roles, although those roles can take different meanings. The essential understanding between coach and coachee or even among group co-coaches must be how the partners will work together (Close, 2013). With the establishment of ground rules that create clarity around the roles each participant will play in the coaching relationship, coaching partnerships become more focused and successful (Aguilar, 2017; Charteris & Smardon, 2014). While a trained and qualified coach is essential for program success (Aguilar, 2017, James-Ward, 2013; Knight, 2011; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012), it is possible and beneficial to have more than one trained coach within a coaching partnership (Jewett & MacPhee, 2012). Key factors for any coaching construct are well-defined relationships and clear expectations and roles (Huff, Preston, and Goldring, 2013), even if those roles differ from traditional understandings, so long as all parties are agreed on meaning (Charteris & Smardon, 2014).

Using a Coaching Model

Using a coaching model will increase the likelihood that a coaching partnership will be successful (Huff et al., 2013; Kretlow, et al., 2011; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). This condition is as important as having a coach who is trained in coach theory and understands coaching models (Knight, 2011). Those programs that do not have formal training for coaches do not see the same level of success as those that do (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). It is important to note, however, that

training does not necessarily equate to quality delivery of a coaching model, as “instruction in the specific phases of coaching did not ensure that coaches addressed the phases to sufficient depth during the sessions” (Huff et al., 2013, p. 519). Knight (2007) noted that while it is important to have knowledge of a coaching model, adhering to this is also critical for the coaching work to be effective, and this lack of adherence is often what determines the quality of the coaching. Models for coaching arrangement include frameworks such as GROW, which stands for Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward, and GROUP which stands for Goal, Reality, Options, Understanding others, Perform (Brown & Grant, 2010). Each model’s acronym describes the steps that a coaching session follows, and although these steps are not always used in the same sequence or for the same amount of time, effective coaching models have versions of these steps incorporated in their process (Bloom et al., 2005; Brown & Grant, 2010)

Taking a partnership approach. A partnership approach is essential to quality coaching relationships (Knight, 2011). A close look at the literature on coaching in education revealed that the adoption of this mindset is a defining component of coaching success (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aguilar, 2017; Knight, 2011). The partnership approach refers to the intention of both the coach and the coachee, and the agreement that they are looking to work as equals endeavoring to create new levels of performance for the coachee (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). As this type of approach is possible in many different facets of life, such as mentorship or training scenarios, it is an intention more than a coaching model.

This perspective aligns with the larger body of noneducational coaching research, but it is particularly important within the context of education, as it was cited repeatedly as a definitive factor for coaching success in work with educators specifically (Bloom et al., 2005, Kostin & Haeger, 2006, van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). The partnership relationship points to the key

components of successful school leadership as outlined by Fullan (2007), and is reinforced by his contention that relationship lies at the heart of all functional working groups, large or small. The partnership approach includes equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity (Knight, 2007). These mindset qualities dictate that a coaching relationship focus on the needs and desires of the person being coached, or coachee (reflecting the key element of choice), and that the coach and coachee are colleagues, not master and learner (reflecting the key element of equality).

Equality and choice. Equality and choice are key to the perception of participants in a coaching program, as programs that allow for choice and equality created greater implementation of coaching effects by leaders in their school environments (Carraway & Young, 2014). The aspect of equality, where all partners in the dialogue are viewed as valuable, reflects the importance of the flat power dynamic that is essential to coaching according to van Nieuwerburgh (2012). The concept of choice is extremely important in a coaching environment as well, as effective partnerships focus on the needs of the coachee (Murray, Xa, & Mazur, 2009). Rhodes (2013) pointed out that self-efficacy is most developed when the coachee has the ability to choose the topic of greatest importance, and in fact the International Coach Federation (2017) described the coaching partnership as honoring the desire of the coachee.

Praxis and voice. Praxis and voice within a partnership dictate that topics of discussion are drawn from practice-related goals and that all opinions are valid (Knight, 2007). These elements deepen the contextualization of coaching, as that they go beyond a focus on the lived experience of coachees, and require that the coachees choose the contextual scenarios that are most relevant to educational practice. While deep examination of lived experience is common in coaching, this approach is critical when looking at educational coaching, as personal coaching or

relationships coaching are distinct phenomena (Knight, 2007). Personal external factors may have some impact on work performance, but these are generally not the focus in an educational coaching environment (Knight, 2007). Coaching is not counseling (van Nieuwerburgh, 2007), and coaches must refer clients to appropriate professionals in cases where coaching is not a viable option (International Coach Federation, 2017). In the case of educational coaching, the focus must be on praxis, which could include any number of factors within a school environment (Carraway & Young, 2014). The research indicated that when the roles of the coaching partnership were blurred or when the topics were not clearly set, the outcome of the coaching suffered (Moen & Federici, 2012; Zepeda, Parylo, & Ilgan, 2014). When educator coachees express opinions that may not be grounded in educational work, the coaching agreement would dictate that a coach redirect the discussion towards praxis in order to maintain a functional coaching relationship. A key role of the coach in educational leadership coaching is keeping the discussion firmly rooted in praxis (Reed, 2010). This concentration on praxis offers a connection to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), as it creates an opportunity to build greater self-efficacy for the coachee,

Dialogue and reflection. Another aspect of the coaching relationship is that conversations encourage all parties to speak their minds and question assumptions or obstacles (reflecting the key element of dialogue and reflection). This reinforces the distinction between mentoring and coaching as put forward by van Nieuwerburgh (2012) and Knight (2007), and supports the contention that coaching produces opportunities for self-reflection and deep learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Tosey et al., 2011). Participants in coaching studies consistently express an appreciation for the ability to discuss personal concerns and to reflect on practices with the help of another (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Bossi, 2008; Reed, 2010). Dialogue and reflection

are key components of any high-quality coaching model (Purcek, 2014), and serve as tools for critical self-examination and personal action planning (Knight, 2007). In fact, in cultures where dialogue and reflection were poorly understood within the coaching partnership, coaching saw more limited applicability (Zepeda et al., 2014).

Reciprocity. Reciprocity is a component of the coaching partnership that allows both coach and coachee to engage in a learning process based on mutual respect and curiosity. An effective coaching partnership includes the mindset that the developmental journey is a learning experience for all parties involved and that each can hold the other to account, reflecting the key elements of reciprocity (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; Carraway & Young, 2015; Loving, 2011; Knight, 2007; Kostin & Haeger, 2006). The dimension of reciprocity is one of the key elements in establishing a nonhierarchical relationship (Charteris & Smardon, 2014) and impacts the quality of coaching dialogue. This reciprocal dynamic is also described by van Nieuwerburgh (2012) as an important part of the coaching discourse, and as such constitutes a significant qualifier of coaching in education. Robertson (2016) contended that reciprocity is a cornerstone of the coaching relationship, without which trust cannot be built. She stated that “the coach and educational leader use reciprocal learning processes, and as trust builds in the relationship, leaders are willing to approach the spaces of vulnerability and new learning” (Roberston, 2013, p. 66). Reciprocity is key to a healthy coaching partnership.

The reciprocal nature of dialogue and reflection creates for coaching an opportunity to engage in double-loop learning and to set up a plan for success that utilizes challenging but attainable goals as outlined by the theory of zone of proximal development (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Through a reciprocal exchange of ideas coaches can challenge the assumptions and biases that affect coachee perceptions, and move them to

small but meaningful steps that can help them to actualize new solutions, which, in turn, may lead to a greater level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Wise & Cavazos, 2017).

Confidentiality and trust. Reciprocity is important to the coaching relationship, but it may not produce lasting effects if there is a lack of trust between the coach and coachee. This last criterion for coaching success is arguably the most important. From trade publications (Reed, 2010), to quantitative efforts (Hattie, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2013), to books and fundamental resources for coaching (Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2011; Robertson, 2016; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012), trust is described as an essential part of the coaching relationship, and confidentiality is a key building block for the creation of trust. In their foundational work on coaching, Bloom et al. (2005) stated:

In order to make coaching possible and to support a principal through the process, a coach must, at a minimum, have a trusting relationship with the coachee—one firmly grounded in the commitment to help the principal coachee achieve his or her goals.
(p. 26).

The ability of a coachee to set the direction of professional development without pressure or redirection from a coach deeply impacts the level of trust in a partnership (Bloom et al., 2005). However, an assurance of confidentiality may alleviate the worry of a coachee that what is said or observed will be used to evaluate their performance as a professional (Knight, 2011). It is difficult for educators and particularly for new leaders to put aside their fear of being judged in order to open up to a greater discourse on the quality of their practice (Garrett, 2008; Nicolaidou, Karagiorgi, & Petridou, 2017; Rogers, Hauserman, & Skytt, 2016). In fact, a lack of trust is identified as a destructive factor for school culture and teacher job performance (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015).

Duration and frequency of coaching sessions. While the literature rarely identified an exact number of sessions or most effective duration of sessions, Wise and Cavazos (2017) looked at these conditions of the coaching relationship through a survey of over 1,300 principals at all levels of the K–12 system across the United States. They found that the more often a coachee sees a coach in any given month, the more highly the coach is rated, and that one to two hours is the most highly rated duration for a coaching session (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). In-person coaching sessions were viewed as the most effective by principals, followed by telephone sessions, and finally email coaching, with most coaching sessions happening in one or two week intervals (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). This information is reflected in other works where the coaching took place either weekly or biweekly, and sessions lasted approximately an hour (Brown & Tobis, 2013; Cerni et al., 2010; Close, 2013). Coaching sessions can be ongoing for an undetermined amount of time (Brown & Tobis, 2013), but are normally concentrated on particular goals, with the number of sessions depending on the complexity of the goal, but normally falling somewhere between two and 12 sessions (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Wise and Cavazos (2017) found that with consistency of frequency and length, coupled with solid coaching capabilities, 85% of participants in educational leadership coaching programs stated they are better principals with the coaching, and 72% state that student achievement grew as a result of leadership coaching.

Forms of Coaching in Education

Coaching within the realm of education takes many forms (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). Just as the worlds of business and sports have specialty coaches that use a variety of techniques, education uses different forms depending on the needs of the coachee and the context of the educational work (Knight, 2011). Educational coaching offers different options for

professionals looking to take the most appropriate approach to improving their practice.

Blended Coaching

Bloom et al. (2005) outlined two basic approaches to coaching; facilitative and instructional. These approaches come together in the form of blended coaching, which merges them into one flexible form of coaching within education. In order to understand the blended nature of the model, it is first necessary to examine the different perspectives (Bloom et al., 2005)

Instructional Approach. Bloom et al. (2005) posited that instructional coaching in this context is coaching that addresses an individual's way of doing. The coaching discussion revolved around the duties that the coachee undertakes more than it investigates the thinking that creates these actions—it sought to discover and implement new actions or more efficient approaches. Though Bloom et al. (2005) have pointed out that coaching is not training, mentoring, or supervision, the instructional aspect they discussed focuses on the discussion of leaders' external behaviors during the course of regular practice. This type of learning reflects Argyris and Schon's (1978) concept of single-loop learning, as it addresses immediate fixes to problems without questioning the underlying assumptions. Some examples of instructional coaching from Bloom et al. (2005) included a principal's ability to schedule classroom visits, or a vice-principal's methods surrounding data organization. This type of discussion remains client driven and is explorative in nature, as described by the ICF (2017) in that the coach does not tell the principal what to do, but rather challenges the actions of the administrator and engages him or her in an exploration of alternative courses of action that lead to better results.

Facilitative approach. Facilitative coaching, according to Bloom et al. (2005), addresses

a coach's way of being as described by van Nieuwerburgh (2012). This way of being is a coach's ability to critically reflect upon and explore the thoughts, feelings, and assumptions that occur for the coach during a coaching session, allowing him or her to move these potential distractors aside in order to be completely present to the coachee (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aguilar, 2017; Bloom et al., 2005). This reflection and exploration would encompass Argyris & Schon's (1978) double-loop learning approach to coaching that follows the same general guidelines set out by the International Coach Federation (2017), but focuses less on the actions that the coach may undertake and more on the thinking that motivates the actions. As the coach, through this way of being, guides the coachee toward these same reflections and explorations, a development opportunity is created that facilitates a coachee's realization of assumptions or biases (Tosey, 2011).

Comparing instructional and facilitative approaches. The facilitative approach stands in contrast to a more instructional approach, where a coach would simply direct a coachee toward different actions or share personal accounts to influence new thinking patterns (Bloom et al., 2005). This approach does not require the participants to examine whether or not the directed courses of action are in fact helpful to the coachee. Facilitative coaching pushes the coachee further. Bloom et al. (2005) offered as an example of facilitative coaching a discussion that asks the principal to examine assumptions about power or control in the school setting, and how these assumptions help or hinder the learning agenda. Here is how Bloom et al. (2005) illustrated the potential application of both approaches:

Let's examine the distinction between these two fundamental coaching strategies as they might apply to Jack, the principal in our earlier example who is committed to building a strong leadership team at Highline High. We will assume that Jack has approached his

coach for assistance. Jack's coach might use instructional strategies to help him set up management and governance structures. The coach might share his own experience, provide informative articles, and arrange visits with Jack to other high school sites. To help Jack learn to empower others, however, his coach would take a facilitative approach. This might include observing Jack as he interacts with his assistant principals and providing feedback, asking Jack to reflect on his observed behavior relative to his goals. Jack's coach might ask him to examine his deep assumptions about power, control, and responsibility. His coach might also ask him to role-play conversations with the APs, to try out new ways of operating, and then to step back and evaluate them. (p. 56)

These two types of approaches to coaching create a potential spectrum for coaches to consider as they interact with coachees.

The discussion of blended coaching put forth by Bloom et al. (2005) is important in examining the literature as it is referenced by numerous studies. These studies point to the blended coaching model as the base for their varying explorations of the impact or perception of coaching in education (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Ezaki, 2015; Guthrie, Godring, & Bickman, 2014; Huff et al., 2013; James-Ward, 2011; James-Ward, 2012; Loving, 2011; Purcek, 2014; Silver, Lockmiller, Copland, & Tripps, 2009; Zepeda et al., 2014). This foundational resource allows coaches the freedom to move along a continuum between instructional and facilitative approaches. Loving (2011) expanded on this continuum when she discussed the many points between collaborative coaching and consultative coaching. While some scholars may argue that consulting is a separate entity focused on short term solutions as opposed to long term goal attainment, with transmission of knowledge playing a much larger role than exploration (Kostin & Haeger, 2006; Rhodes, 2013), Loving (2011) and James-Ward (2012) contended that

consultative coaching is merely a strategy for partnership that is applied as the need is warranted. Trade literature indicated that some application of both collaborative and consultative work is commonplace and perhaps inevitable (Bossi, 2008). All of these observations would support the continuum proposed by Bloom et al.

An examination of blended coaching (Bloom et al., 2005) serves School Division X (SDX) as a point of differentiation between surface level coaching and the program's intent to challenge and discover participants' understandings of coaching and leadership. In order to co-construct leadership language and practice, stakeholders in SDX are well served by a differentiation between the two perspectives contained in blended coaching and the connection they carry to the supportive theories of social cognitive theory, zone of proximal development, and single- and double-loop learning.

Types of Coaching

The traditional coaching practice in SDX has not differentiated between types of coaching or purposes of coaching (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). As such, many SDX employees who are called coaches engage in a variety of activities that, while valuable, are not in fact coaching or are a very specific kind of coaching. A differentiation between the types of coaching in this literature review offers stakeholders an opportunity to focus squarely on the leadership coaching that this study aimed to evaluate. This distinction separated the practices of other SDX employees from the leadership work that lies at the heart of the program.

Subject area coaching. Literacy or reading coaching is often referenced in the research and can have many meanings. Jewett and MacPhee (2012) described scenarios where literacy coaches can either lack or have minimal coach training, and Knight (2007) described situations

where literacy or reading coaches can signal multiple roles, even within the same school district. Knight (2007) elaborated through situations where the reading or literacy coach simply delivered or modeled strategy or curriculum, and engaged in very little actual coaching. Numeracy or math coaching suffers many of the same challenges as literacy coaching, and has endured many of the same confusions over roles and outcomes (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

Instructional coaching (Knight, 2007). According to Knight (2007), instructional coaches are full-time developmental specialists, and go beyond curriculum-specific concerns addressed by a numeracy or literacy coach to include many different facets of instruction. Instructional coaches may address behavior management, data analysis, and application of research based strategies (Knight, 2007). Knight's description of instructional coaching is distinct from Bloom et al.'s (2005) instructional approach to coaching. Where Bloom et al. discussed a general approach that could be applied to any number of coaching duties, Knight outlined a distinct set of responsibilities or topics of conversation, which are addressed by using either a facilitative or instructional approach, depending on the circumstance. As an example, Knight's instructional coach could discuss formative assessment, and could use Bloom et al.'s facilitative approach if the coach engaged the teacher in an examination of their assumptions on assessment, similar to Argyris & Schon's (1978) double-loop learning. By contrast, the same coach could use Bloom et al.'s instructional approach to engage the teacher in a discussion of data collection activities relative to formative assessment to explore the actions that the educator takes with no intentional discussion of the cognitive dimension, similar to Argyris & Schon's (1978) single-loop learning.

Leadership coaching. Wise and Cavazos (2017) looked to clarify the role of leadership coach within the educational context. They stated that, "the main purpose of a leadership coach

is (a) to expand an individual's or group's capacity to obtain desired results and (b) to facilitate individual or organizational development" (Wise & Cavazos, 2017, p. 3). In their expansion on this subject, Wise and Carvazos further stated that coaching for leadership development is focused on the coachee's ability to conceptualize and actualize leadership in the educational setting. Rhodes (2013) pointed to the effectiveness of coaching to improve principals' leadership self-efficacy, and posited that ongoing engagement in the development of self-efficacy among principals can lead to better leadership behaviors, including improved coach-leadership behaviors towards staff, students, and other administrators. Carraway and Young (2014) discussed the importance of establishing an instructional leadership identity, and pointed to coaching as an effective tool. Leadership coaching is distinct in that the particular focus is consistently leadership, and this focus has shown positive effects (Bloom et al., 2005; Robinson, 2010; Rogers et al., 2016). Leadership coaching is often both successful and well received by coaches and coachees (Wise & Cavazos, 2017).

Coaching Structures

School District X engaged in a coaching structure that was not only new to the organization but was also new to school-based leadership coaching in general (Aas & Vavik, 2015). In order to conceptualize the group dialogic coaching structure, an examination of more traditional coaching structures offers a point of reference within this review. Stakeholders gain the opportunity to distinguish between traditional constructs and the ground-breaking efforts of this pilot program.

Much of the coaching literature identified two structures; coaching dyads (one coach and one coachee) and coaching groups (one coach and multiple coachees, usually groups of 3–6 including the coach). Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) contended that one-to-one coaching dyads are

the most effective, that this construct allows for a stronger partnership relationship, and that it offers the best chance for confidentiality and trust. Further, he listed possible implications of group dynamics as an impingement of the quality of trust and eroding confidentiality.

Conversely, Aas and Vavik (2015) pointed out that group coaching has many benefits, including shared leadership challenges, greater empathy for particular individual challenges, and varied approaches and questions regarding leadership scenarios. They posited that group coaching can have a positive effect on personal agency as it relates to leadership identity, and point to increased collaboration and cooperation among group members as they increase interpersonal sensitivity. The group dynamic is also credited with enabling an improvement in group members' social competence (Aas & Fluckiger, 2016). Aas and Vavik (2015) pointed to group coaching as a powerful strategy for improving leadership, and that group sessions were highly valued by participants. Specifically, they argued that

bringing existing and aspiring school principals together in a target-oriented group-coaching process may have profound positive effect on leaders' context-based identity development. The group provides a social learning environment with opportunities for contextual feedback from other leaders, which broadens the participants' thinking about how leadership can be performed. (p. 262)

The group dynamic in this circumstance offers the opportunity to bridge differences of experience and understanding through the sharing of multiple perspectives, a product often associated with larger numbers of professionals (Aas & Vavik, 2015). The group dynamic also opens the door to Bandura's (1986) concept of social persuasion, as many coaches can have profound impacts on a coachee's understandings of leadership and communication (Charteris & Smardon, 2014).

Oliver and Fitzgerald (2013) warned of the possible problematic implications of working within a group structure, which could include the interplay of group member personal stories. This interplay could create a situation where a particular group member is feeling attacked or singled out, eroding the trust created within the group, much like the possibilities pointed out by van Nieuwerburgh (2012). Both dyadic and group structures for coaching constructs have benefits, and research has shown particular attention to the dangers that either approach may have on coaching success (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Oliver & Fitzgerald, 2013).

Peer coaching can take a group or dyadic structure, with the defining element of the structure being that the coach and coachee(s) are at the same level of the organization; specifically, teachers coaching teachers or administrators coaching administrators. Zepeda et al. (2014) described the peer coaching construct as professionals receiving support and feedback from peers in nonthreatening, non-evaluative ways. These authors further stated that peer coaching, as a continuous development tool, builds relationships among peers, promotes collegiality, fosters the creation of professional learning communities, and builds teachers' instructional capacity, helping them to better understand and align with curriculum (Zepeda et al., 2014).

Peer Dialogic Group Coaching

Dialogic peer coaching in groups takes the previously mentioned aspects of peer coaching and places them within a context stripped of title and hierarchy. Charteris and Smardon (2014) distinguished between peer coaching and dialogic peer coaching when they stated:

Peer coaching can be described as a system of reciprocal learning and support (Zepeda et al., 2013). In this research the term “dialogic peer coaching” is used to describe a process

where the teacher participants are situated as agentic co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge in peer learning environments. (p. 112)

Their work on dialogic peer coaching focused on teachers interpreting data in a peer-coaching group, and all members of the peer groups were coaches themselves (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). The construct between these coaches was dialogic as described by Oliver & Fitzgerald (2013); recognizing that there is no expert or inexpert, but co-creators of meaning. Rather than designating a coach to guide the discussions, Charteris and Smardon suggested a format in which all teachers in the groups, including the research participants, were peer coaches: positioning themselves as learners, leading their own learning and supporting the learning of others. Protocols, which emphasised [*sic*] reciprocal respect, were established to ensure participant safety, allowing participants space to articulate their thinking and take risks in their learning. (p. 115)

This structure creates a flat, collaborative arrangement, offering a deeper opportunity for the partnership approach described by Knight (2011) and van Nieuwerburgh (2012).

At first glance, this construct contradicts the findings of other studies, which suggested that a lack of clear roles within a coaching relationship inhibits the coaching process (Moen & Federici, 2012; Zepeda, Parylo, & Ilgan, 2014). This potential confusion can be mitigated if all participants receive coach training and understand the basic model and agreement of the coaching construct (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). Further, the intent and agreement of the participants mirrored Oliver and Fitzgerald's (2013) description of dialogic organizational development, where the intention is to “. . . use language to describe, explore, and facilitate change within the dialogic system of a coaching client, group, and/or organization” (p. 31).

Jewett and MacPhee (2012) engaged in a study in which the coaching construct was

described as dialogic collaborative peer coaching. Their description of the model made a key contention that addressed educators' reticence to take on an expert role with peers. They stated:

Given that they all teach in a school district that supports a coaching initiative, many of the teachers' histories of participation with coaching contributed to their perceptions of coach as expert. This was a position with which they were not only uncomfortable, but in some cases, unwilling to take on. However, we took the stance that peer coaching was collaborating with other teachers to deepen and enhance teaching practices with the ultimate goal of improving student learning. . . . Taking this stance eliminated the need for our coaching teachers to be "experts," a role none of them wanted to take with their colleagues. (Jewett & MacPhee, 2012, p. 14)

Once roles were understood and clarified, the coaching process took shape, further supporting the suggestion that clarity and role negotiation are critical to the coaching process (Charteris & Smardon, 2014).

Jewett and MacPhee (2012) and Charteris and Smardon (2014) are key contributors in that their work represented an emergent conceptualization of the coaching partnership. Without designated coach and coachee roles, prior research suggested that coaching as a construct is likely to be less effective (Moen & Federici, 2012; Zepeda, Parylo, & Ilgan, 2014). Other studies, however, suggested that as long as participants were trained in coaching, were familiar with an agreed upon model, and demonstrated fidelity to the coaching process, the possibility for gains in leadership, coaching skill, and classroom performance existed (Alro & Dahl, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012). These findings were consistent with Bloom et al.'s (2005) contention that facilitative coaching is effective when applied by trained coaches. The findings also reinforced Huff, Preston and Goldring's (2013) contention that

fidelity to a coaching model is key to coaching success. Further, the group dialogic approach to coaching demonstrated a high degree of contextualization, as participants were familiar with each other's challenges and goals (Charteris & Smardon, 2014), and, as mentioned, this contextualization is essential in the application of coaching outcomes outside of the professional development sessions (Reed, 2010).

Fullan (2014) aligned with a group approach to coaching when he stated that a principal "must look out to improve within" (p. 97). By this he suggested that a principal who works alone can reach only a certain degree of effectiveness. By connecting with peers and taking a system or district perspective, the leader in any one school may gain greater access to insights and strategies for effective leadership. Dialogic peer coaching (Charteris & Smardon, 2014) allows school-based administrators the opportunity to take a systemic perspective through collegial engagement in real-time matters of educational leadership.

Group leadership coaching, the capacity of leaders to reflect together on their leadership behaviors, and the role of the group coach are areas that require further research (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016). Charteris and Smardon (2014) brought these calls together when they stated:

There is an authenticity in creating and co-producing leadership within professional learning communities. Although the peer coaches' practices appeared to enable shared leadership, an area for further investigation could be the experiences of the members of the professional learning communities in relation to their perceptions of how they were co-producing leadership practices. (p. 121)

Studies of dialogic group coaching have focused on teachers (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012), dialogic groups with designated coaches (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Ass & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Nicolaidou et al., 2017) or elder care administrators

(Alro & Dahl, 2015). An investigation into the perception and experiences of school-based leaders in a peer dialogic coaching group with no designated leader offers an opportunity to address this gap in the literature.

Clarity concerning the concept of coaching has been somewhat elusive in education due to its many different types, constructs, and models (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). SDX staff suffered from this lack of clarity prior to the pilot peer dialogic coaching program (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). Coaching can be categorized by primary intent (leadership, executive, or subject area), or by approach (facilitative, collaborative, consultative, or instructional). It can be examined through a consideration of constructs (dyad, group, peer) and logistics (place, frequency and length of delivery). However, an unwavering aspect of coaching that differentiates it from other types of professional development is that it is directed by the coachee, is a partnership, and is grounded in a model that moves people toward an intended goal (Ezaki, 2015). These aspects of coaching offer strong opportunities for the development of educational leadership as they stress that efforts stay connected to the dynamic lived experience of school leaders.

Educational Leadership and the Lead Learner Perspective

Part of the problem of practice for School District X (SDX) is the lack of a common understanding of leadership (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). As Malandro (2009) stresses the importance of such an understanding as well as a common language for effective leadership practice, this literature review outlines the educational leadership perspectives that influenced SDX's chosen approach to leadership for the pilot coaching program, which was lead learner leadership (Fullan, 2014). The discussion begins with a brief outline of the history of educational leadership research.

Educational leadership, and principal or vice principal school leadership in particular, was a popular focus within the larger body of educational scholarship (Ezaki, 2015; Goff et al., 2014; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Leithwood, et al., 2010). While the research on this topic was comprehensive, much of the work up until the first decade of the twenty-first century focused on leadership styles such as transformational, instructional, or transactional leadership (Leithwood, et al., 2010), or the effects of leadership on teacher job satisfaction or school climate (Bogler, 2001; Williams, 2014; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). This exploration of educational leadership literature will start with a brief definition of the concept of educational leadership, followed by a survey of student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011) before narrowing the perspective to an examination of the lead learner perspective, which is a part of the student-centered theory (Robinson, 2011). This overview of leadership theory informs the problem of practice, as leaders in School District X do not have a common understanding of the nature of leadership or the most effective means of communicating to produce maximum student learning (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017).

Definition

As Robinson (2011) and Fullan (2007) provided the bulk of the research for the eventual focus of this review—the lead learner perspective in school leadership—the general definitions of leadership from each provide a starting point for the leadership review. Robinson (2011) stated:

It is commonly asserted that leadership is the exercise of influence, but so is force, coercion, and manipulation, and we wouldn't call those types of influence leadership. So there must be something else. Leadership is distinguished from force, coercion, and manipulation by the source of the influence. (p. 6)

In previous work, when looking to define leadership generally, Robinson (2008) described three sources of influence in the realm of educational leadership: the exercise of formal authority, attraction to one or more of the personal qualities of the leader, and the leader's relevant expertise. She contended that these three elements of leadership are intertwined and dynamic, that they can be demonstrated not only by the principal or lead authority in a building but that varying degrees of all three types of leadership are exerted across a group in any school or educational organization (Robinson, 2008). While a principal may make a decision on an assessment strategy, a department head (representing a position of formal leadership) may be the person who sees it through at the ground level, and highly respected teachers (representing informal leaders with appropriate personal qualities) may be the driving force behind its acceptance. The consultant that brings the assessment background (representing relevant expertise) may be the leader that effectuates its implementation. In this sense, true leadership in an educational setting, according to Robinson (2008), is distributed among multiple agents in the educational system.

Robinson's (2008) overall description of leadership (distinct from her theory of student-centered leadership, which will be discussed later) partners well with Fullan (2007), whose work offers a slightly deeper framework for leadership. He stated that leadership in an educational context "is not mobilizing others to solve problems we already know how to solve, but to help them confront problems that have never yet been successfully addressed" (p. 3). He offered five components to leadership: moral purpose, understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, and coherence making (Fullan, 2007). Fullan (2007) contended that when these components come together with enthusiasm, energy, and hope, internal and external commitment are created and positive change ensues. Fullan (2007) referenced moral

purpose and understanding change, components of leadership that represented a driving force not mentioned by Robinson (2011). This driving purpose, according to Fullan (2007), offered a necessary set of intentions and actions that can lead to critical reflection on formal decision-making processes. Fullan (2007) contends that a moral purpose is about both ends and means. He stated:

In education, an important end is to make a difference in the lives of students. But the means of getting to that end are also crucial. If you don't treat others (for example, teachers) well and fairly, you will be a leader without followers. (p. 13)

The intention involved in formal leadership and the ability to understand change are critical, and without these in place, Fullan (2007) suggested that effective leadership is not possible.

Relationship building (Fullan, 2007) underpins Robinson's (2011) element of personal qualities, as both concepts focus on the interplay between leader and follower. Whereas Robinson (2011) did not specifically mention communication as a part of this element, Fullan (2007) noted that the appreciation of personal qualities is a key component of a good leader's approach to building relationships. Setting the example is another powerful leadership strategy (Fullan, 2007) that further supports Robinson's (2011) case for the importance of personal qualities in leadership.

Finally, Fullan's (2007) components of coherence making and knowledge creation and sharing are easily connected to Robinson's (2011) element of relevant expertise. Robinson (2011) stated that the leader who demonstrates expertise immediately creates the possibility of a functional working environment. This could serve as an excellent summary of Fullan's (2007) deeper point, where he stated that powerful leadership creates transformation not only through the simple fact that a leader has expertise but also in the way the leader uses this expertise to share and create knowledge.

The concept of leadership in schools is dynamic, and efforts to define it too narrowly can trivialize rather than clarify its meaning (Leithwood et al., 2010). As such, the definitions provided by Fullan (2007) and Robinson (2011) are effective starting points for an examination of the literature. The use of these perspectives offers a brief insight into some of the challenges and issues in school leadership without getting so specific as to lose the sense of an overall definition.

Student-Centered Leadership

Student-centered leadership, as described by Robinson (2011), takes five of the leadership behaviors that have the greatest impact on student learning and combines them into a theory of leadership. She identified ensuring a safe and orderly environment, resourcing strategically, establishing goals and expectations, ensuring quality teaching, and leading teacher learning and development as the five critical dimensions of effective school leadership. To implement these dimensions, Robinson (2011) refined her definition of leadership through the description of three broad leadership capabilities required to effectuate the five dimensions of leadership. She stated:

Student-centered leadership is about knowing what to do and how to do it. Although the five dimensions tell leaders what to focus on to make a bigger impact on students, they say little about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to make the dimensions work in a particular school context. The knowledge and skills needed to engage confidently in these five dimensions are described in three broad leadership capabilities.

(p. 16)

Robinson (2011) listed these capabilities as applying relevant knowledge, solving complex problems, and building relational trust. These capabilities address trust building and incorporate

a capacity to use relevant knowledge drawn from learning data, which is a key aspect of instructional leadership according to Hallinger (2003).

When describing the dimensions, Robinson (2011) made comparisons to other leadership theories. The dimension of establishing goals and expectations can be tied to the transformational behavior of establishing a vision (Burns, 2012). Robinson described goal setting as ubiquitous to leadership work, but contended that much of this important work remained a paper exercise that has little impact on staff and school priorities. Her focus within this dimension was on the prioritization and communication of goals so that student learning is improved. In her discussion of ensuring quality teaching through planning, coordinating, and evaluating teachers, Robinson (2011) stated, “In schools where teachers report that their leadership is heavily involved in these activities, students do better. This type of leadership is at the heart of what is called *instructional leadership* in the North American literature” (p. 13). She also connected instructional leadership to the dimension of leading teacher learning and development. “Strong instructional leadership focused on ambitious learning goals soon uncovers shortfalls in teachers’ knowledge and skill” (p. 13), and within this framework, an effective educational leader causes improved student outcomes by joining teachers and other leaders on the job exploring ways to achieve student learning goals.

Dimensions that serve to create a context for deep learning underpin the relational aspects of the student-centered leadership approach (Robinson et al., 2008). Creating a safe and orderly environment and resourcing strategically allow a leader to engage in the more person-oriented behaviors of teacher evaluation and leading teacher learning. Within these dimensions, Robinson (2011) claimed that “teachers feel respected, students feel their teachers care about them and their learning, and school and classroom routines protect instructional time” (p. 14).

Robinson (2011) stated that the five dimensions (ensuring a safe and orderly environment, resourcing strategically, establishing goals and expectations, ensuring quality teaching, and leading teacher learning and development) work together as a set and that they have strong reciprocal effects. This theory of student-centered leadership also depends on the ability of leaders to demonstrate the three capabilities that Robinson (2011) outlined as critical. Fullan (2014), DeWitt (2017), and Hattie (2015) confirmed the strength of this theory, and either used it explicitly in their analyses of student performance or used it as a platform for further refinement. As this theory grew from the research of best practices in education reported to the government of New Zealand (Robinson et al., 2009), it took an important place in the educational research (Smith & Smith, 2015).

Lead Learner Approach

Michael Fullan described a framework for effective school leadership in his book *The Principal* (2014). In this work he identified outmoded drivers of education and confirmed significant changes to the role of principal. He stated, “New, rapidly emerging change dynamics almost organically favor a different and more powerful role for principals” (p. 7). Fullan (2014) also identified wrongheaded policy drivers (accountability, individualistic solutions, technology, and fragmented strategies) and proposed different drivers that will set the learning organization on the path to deeper student learning and higher achievement. He lists these as capacity building, collaborative effort, pedagogy, and “systemness” (a word coined by Fullan, 2014, p. 25). These four drivers come together in Fullan’s (2014) description of lead learner.

Capacity Building

Mangin (2014) stated that capacity building, defined as intentional efforts to increase the knowledge and skills of an individual to improve job performance, has the potential to facilitate

the adoption of new practices. Building capacity alone, however, is not predictive of the extent to which new practices will be implemented, as the desire of learners to use the new skills and knowledge have a mediating effect (Mangin, 2014). Nicolaidou et al. (2017) identified capacity building as an investment in social capital and noted that while it could emerge naturally through networking and sharing, formal training should not be overlooked. Fullan (2014) embedded capacity building at the heart of the lead learner approach when he suggested that:

the principal who makes the biggest impact on learning is the one who attends to other matters as well, but, most important, “participates as a learner” with teachers in helping move the school forward. Leading teacher learning means being proactively involved with teachers such that principal and teachers alike are learning. (p. 58)

Developing new skills and knowledge as a learning community is a powerful leadership strategy, but capacity building is most impactful as a shared experience, modeled by the leader and nurtured in the school community (DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014; Robinson, 2008). What’s more, Fullan (2014) stated that accountability is a natural product of capacity building, fulfilling a key requirement of accountable education.

Collaboration

The social nature of capacity building within Fullan’s (2014) framework points to the importance of collaboration. DeWitt (2017) confirmed that collaboration is critical to student achievement when he connected collaboration with collective teacher efficacy. Hattie’s (2009) meta-analysis found that collaboration had a very significant effect, larger than that of Robinson’s (2010) leading teacher learning and development. Fullan (2014) contended that modeling, supporting, and leading teacher learning and development is a social phenomenon, built on relationships, that must be a collaborative effort in order to be successful. Since a

principal may find it extremely difficult to force teachers to collaborate, the lead learner approach to capacity building and solid relationships between leaders and teachers offers a more effective route to teacher collaboration (Fullan, 2014; Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Collaboration has the potential to create the momentum of the coaching work and to set a tone not only for leadership but for practice within school buildings.

Pedagogy

Pedagogy within Fullan's (2014) framework refers to the intentional efforts of leaders and teachers to focus on the business of teaching and learning. This conceptualization is drawn from the instructional leadership mindset, and stands out in the literature as a key factor for the improvement of student outcomes (Johnson et al., 2017; Knight, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Reed, 2010; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010; Youngs & Cardno, 2015). This focus on teaching and learning brings a finer point to the discussion of development and support than that advanced by transformational leadership (Fullan, 2014). Further, the focus provides a foundational force in the study of leadership impacts on student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Robinson, 2010). The conversation in school leadership must go beyond the interactions and impressions of teachers when discussing their craft, and must examine the effect that their teaching has in the classroom on student learning (Robinson, 2011). The importance of focus within developmental conversations is not lost on the staff of School District X. Participants who expressed an interest in the program identified a desire to engage in practice based discussion, demonstrating a commitment to the improvement of teaching and learning across the organization.

System Level Collaboration

Finally, "systemness" is an important part of Fullan's (2014) overall framework (p. 25). Although he described this separately from lead learner, the concept is an extension of

collaboration in that the lead learner must not only be aware of the needs of students and teachers in the school but must also understand that the most improvement in student achievement is possible when the entire system works together (Fullan, 2014). Fullan (2014) stressed that leaders must look out to improve within and illustrates this concept when he stated:

If as a principal you go it alone, you can get only so far in developing a very good school.

I would venture to say that although it is possible to become a great school despite the system you are in, it is not possible to *stay* effective if the system is not cultivating greatness in *all* of its schools. (p. 97)

Leadership and lead learning is most effective as a collective endeavor, and if principals and vice-principals can share practice and establish a common framework and vocabulary based on solid achievement data with the right drivers in mind, student achievement will improve (Fullan, 2014). This contention stood at the heart of the peer dialogic group coaching program pilot effort. Leaders connected with leaders to develop a deeper understanding of what can be done from a leadership perspective in order to create a better future for students, teachers, and the community at large.

Conclusion

Dialogic peer coaching in groups, as described by Charteris & Smardon (2014) offers great promise for the development and exploration of a lead learner mindset (Fullan, 2014) within a community of school-based administrators. The coaching model is deeply mindful of context, which is an important part of quality adult learning (Aas, 2017; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012; Knight, 2011; Mangin, 2014). The model also brings leaders together so that they can co-construct the lived meaning of leadership as it applies to their school experiences, creating higher levels of function (Flückiger et al., 2017; Fullan, 2014). The coach approach is an ideal strategy

for capacity building (Knight, 2011; Robertson, 2016; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012; Johnson et al., 2016), and allows new skills and knowledge to be applied immediately to professional experience, with space for reflection and critical analysis (Knight, 2007; Aas & Vavik, 2015). By applying lead learning as a backdrop to the coaching experience, leaders were reminded of the importance of pedagogy, and had more opportunities to tie their group and individual development to the core business of teaching and learning (DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014). Additionally, a dialogic peer coaching construct is inherently collaborative as it places all participants in a flat power structure (Aas, 2017; Alro & Dahl, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Flückiger et al., 2017; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012). With a rigorous establishment of ground rules, roles, and expectations, a dialogic coaching approach respects confidentiality, builds trust and fosters powerful relationships (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Bloom et al., 2005; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Flückiger et al., 2017). An understanding of the different constructs and types of coaching offers stakeholders in School District X the opportunity to deepen their understanding of how coaching can affect leadership development.

Coaching in education is dominated by dyads, or, in the emerging cases of group dynamics, is led by a designated coach (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014). A leaderless group dynamic offers new insights into the world of school-based leadership coaching (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012), particularly in times when finances are a major consideration. An investigation into the self-perceptions of participants in such a program offers insights into the degree to which such a program is accepted, thereby supporting or dismissing calls for further empirical research.

Chapter three will present methods for the investigation into the self-perceived effects of dialogic peer coaching for leadership. This study will add to the body of literature through the

examination of a coaching construct that has not yet been evaluated, allowing for an open discussion of the merits and drawbacks of a potentially low-cost peer-led leadership development initiative. Peer dialogic group coaching, supported by the use of a lead learner approach, presents possibilities for school-based administrators to further their own awareness and reflect on their application of strong leadership behaviors.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The role of the school-based administrator (principal and vice-principal) is critical in the development of a highly functional school. It is dynamic and complex, and continues to evolve and expand, providing challenges in administration, communication, relationship building, and culture that did not exist as recently as the 1980s (Aas, 2017; Bush, 2009; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2010). In contrast to historical definitions of the role, school-based administrators (SBAs) are now expected to demonstrate curricular and assessment knowledge while setting up an environment that allows teachers to flourish and students to see increased levels of performance (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). SBAs often face these challenges without a robust structure for support and development, which leaves the leader and the school community at risk of well-intentioned but counterproductive cultural and professional behaviors that can have negative impacts on student learning (Bogler, 2001; DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014; Robertson, 2016; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015).

In order to address the increasing demands on school leaders and to create systems of continuous support and development for principals and vice-principals, School District X (SDX) in western Canada used a dialogic peer approach to coaching and discussion. This pilot program solicited volunteer school-based administrators (SBAs) from within the district to participate in a peer-based support and development format to discuss, define, and develop the concept of leadership within the district. Participants relied on personal experience and coach training to create two avenues for this development and support, a peer dialogic coaching format (split into two coaching groups of four to five) and a peer group discussion format (resulting in one discussion group of six). Each group met once every two weeks starting in September 2017 and

ending in December 2017, for a total of five or six meetings depending on the group. Attendance at the meetings was excellent for coaching group A, with all members attending all six meetings outside of one individual missing a single meeting due to a conflict. Coaching group B had more challenges with attendance, with every group member missing at least one of the six meetings and some attending only one or two meetings total. The discussion group had five meetings, which four participants regularly attended. The remaining three discussion group participants attended between two and four meetings. Meetings took place at a location chosen by each of the groups individually, and all took place between seven and eight in the morning on weekdays as decided by participants.

The literature on coaching provided key conditions that facilitated the possibility for deep reflection on practice within partnership-based relationships (Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2007; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). The research also outlined the structures, theories, and logistics that most impacted the success of coaching programs (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Ezaki, 2015; Guthrie, Godring, & Bickman, 2014; Huff et al., 2013; James-Ward, 2011; James-Ward, 2012; Loving, 2011; Purcek, 2014; Silver, Lockmiller, Copland, & Tripps, 2009; Zepeda, Parylo, & Ilgan, 2014). All of these elements come together in a logic model, which explicates a theory of action for achieving a specific set of goals, and in the field of program evaluation, provides concepts and variables for formative feedback (Lindle et al., 2017). In consideration of the key contentions within the literature, the logic model for this study is as follows:

- If a peer dialogic coaching program incorporates essential elements for coaching success as described in the literature and the coaching relationships are well defined within a peer dialogic coaching program . . .
- Then opportunities for deep reflection on contextual leadership exist. This can facilitate

co-construction of a common understanding of and language for leadership within SDX . . .

- Creating an opportunity to offer formative feedback through qualitative analysis. This approach to coding and theming data identifies factors that may influence the group conceptualization of and language for leadership, providing opportunities for program improvement and a clearer focus on the needs of participants.

This logic model served as a guide to the analysis of School District X's pilot coaching study. It outlined parameters of the study that are useful for the examination of participants' perceptions of the program as they relate to leadership and communication development and support.

This study took a qualitative approach to formative program evaluation using meeting and interview transcripts and other de-identified archival data to determine the perceived effects of the coaching program as they relate to leadership and communication in SDX. Patton (2015) explained that qualitative research can take many forms, with the different approaches reflecting the purpose of the evaluation. The five main approaches to program evaluation within the domain of qualitative research include basic research, applied research, summative evaluation, formative evaluation, and action research, as outlined in Appendix B (Patton, 2015). The evaluation of SDX's pilot program is best served through the use of a qualitative approach to formative program evaluation, as this approach seeks primarily to improve a program, and to identify strengths and weaknesses and provide recommendations for improvement (Patton, 2015). Qualitative program evaluation also holds an intention to participate in discovery and meaning making as it occurs (Hall, Freeman, & Roulston, 2013). A pilot program aligns with this approach as a formative program evaluation can be used to create understanding through descriptions of events elucidating differing perspectives on program practices through the use of

participants' own words (Creswell, 2015). Formative program evaluation reveals implementation issues or inequities which can most easily be identified and targeted through a qualitative approach, leading to a richer understanding of a pilot program's effects (Hall et al., 2013).

A qualitative approach to formative evaluation is appropriate when looking at a pilot program because such an approach is focused entirely on the initiative at the time of implementation, can and will be used to improve what people are actually doing, and is conducive to oral briefings, conferences, or other reports to those interested in similar programs or conditions (Patton, 2015). Drawbacks to this approach include the limited setting in which the program was evaluated, the difficulty or impossibility to generalize findings, and the unique context which may influence the participants within the program. A formative program evaluation offers a researcher the opportunity to define the substance and purpose of a program while developing a deeper understanding and awareness of the cultural interpretations of program participants (Hall et al., 2013).

The conceptual framework of the study proposes that school-based administrators are in need of support and development, and that coaching can provide a valuable means to build such a structure (DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood, et al., 2010; Robertson, 2016). The clarification of leadership concepts and the discussion of real contextual challenges would allow leaders to create and internalize a common conceptualization of leadership and to share and challenge perceived best practice (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). The use of dialogic peer coaching may also create an opportunity for school-based administrators to feel more comfortable and adept with a coaching approach to educational leadership (Knight, 2011), as there is no designated lead coach in the group, thereby offering each participant the chance to gain greater familiarity with the coaching model (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). In order to

explore these potential impacts, this study held at its core the following question and sub questions:

RQ₁: How did PK–12 principals and vice-principals perceive the impact of dialogic peer coaching on their communication and leadership skills?

Sub-questions that were also addressed included:

RQ₂: What was the perceived impact of the group coaching experience on the participants' application of coaching strategies in the school environment?

RQ₃: What were the different leadership and communication perceptions that emerged from dialogic peer coaching groups compared to a peer discussion group?

Setting

School District X (SDX) has a history of high performance and excellent student learning outcomes (Provincial Auditor, 2012; SDX, 2015). To continue this trend, district administrators wanted to develop leadership capacity and consistency among its principals and vice-principals (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). SDX is a publicly funded district with a student enrollment of approximately 11,000 students and 1,200 staff including teaching, paraprofessional, maintenance, and administrative roles. SDX offers a typical selection of face-to-face classes in its elementary (pre-kindergarten through eighth grade), secondary (ninth through twelfth grade), special needs, and specialized schools. It also offers classes online that can be accessed from across the province and is experiencing significant growth in this area. SDX is one of the larger school districts in Western Canada and is among the highest performers in provincial standardized test results and graduation rates (SDX, 2015; Provincial Auditor, 2012). From 2010 to 2017, SDX has worked with a budget of more than 100 million dollars annually, with more than 95% of revenue coming from the provincial government (SDX, 2015),

but prior to the coaching pilot the district experienced major cuts, including a seven percent overall budget reduction (Chief Financial Officer, personal communication, June 14, 2017). Enrollment has increased steadily since 2011, and is expected to increase at a projected rate of about 300 students per year. SDX opened three new elementary schools in 2017 and has hired numerous teachers since 2013, with future hiring projections indicating a need for many more new administrators as many current leaders are scheduled to retire by 2020 (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017).

Leadership Implications

The upcoming influx of new principals and vice-principals presents an urgent need for the examination and review of current development and support practices for school-based administrators. At the time of the pilot study, leadership development practice for School District X consisted of an optional one-week course offered before vice-principals' first year in the role and six meetings for new vice-principals scheduled throughout the first year of administration. Other than regular administrative meetings, which focused primarily on current management concerns and critical information, there was no ongoing structure for development or support outside of the vice-principal development meetings (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). With limited leadership training, the application of leadership can vary to include positive and negative leadership practices, and less effective practices can impede student success (Cotton, 2003). SDX sought to avoid counterproductive leadership behaviors, and as Malandro (2009) pointed out, stood to benefit from formal leadership definitions and language to create consistency in the organization. Fullan (2014), Hattie (2009), and Robinson (2011) have all established that a clear focus on the business of teaching and learning, using a lead learner approach to educational leadership has positive effects

on student learning outcomes. This pilot program was designed with an intent to build common leadership understandings, language, and practices based on these approaches.

External Pressures

Western Canada experienced an economic boom in the early 2000s (Eaton, 2017), which was fueled primarily by the oil and gas industry. However, prior to the pilot program, these natural resource economies suffered setbacks in 2014 due to dropping prices in the commodities sector, and the provincial government was demanding tighter fiscal responsibility while instituting crippling cuts to education (O'Connor, 2017). In SDX, this meant that any new supports provided for leaders must be cost effective or free, and must leverage the skills and behaviors that are currently available. Dialogic peer development among school-based administrators offers a cost effective option for principals and vice-principals to develop their leadership skills as a group (Charteris & Smardon, 2014). As Fullan (2007) stressed the importance of relationships in quality leadership, peer coaching also offers a viable solution for meaningful ongoing support. An investigation into the perceived effects of a peer dialogic coaching group using a recognized coaching model provides insight into the benefits and drawbacks of a cost-effective program for leadership development and support.

Participants

The participants in the SDX leadership pilot program were contacted via a district-wide email on the last day of the 2016–2017 school year. The email asked for volunteers to participate in a peer dialogic coaching program with a brief explanation of the concept and a description of the base resource reference for leadership exploration. Seventeen of the district's 56 principals and vice-principals replied to the invitation, and all were invited to an introductory meeting on the first day of the 2017–2018 school year, with 14 administrators attending. At this meeting, the

group requested a second meeting to clarify group expectations, which took place during the second week of September, 2017. Because this study's intention was to examine the effects of a leadership development and support program unique to SDX, the district was chosen as a unique site offering rich data on a new approach to leadership development. This site selection mirrors Creswell's (2015) description of purposeful sampling, which dictates that a site might be chosen to provide useful insights into a given phenomenon.

Data

SDX has created and reviewed coaching programs in the past (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). In the creation and review of a new teacher development program, baseline surveys, interviews, and focus groups provided information as to the perceived experiences and needs of new teachers. The administrator development and support program followed a similar course of action. After the initial invitation and introduction meeting, participants met to divide into coaching and discussion groups, and received as a base reference a copy of *The Principal* by Fullan (2014). They were informed that group sessions would be recorded, that the program would be evaluated using de-identified data drawn from interviews and surveys, and that this de-identified data may be used as part of a dissertation. Each group chose times and places for interaction, varying the location for convenience of travel, and meeting approximately every two weeks for a total of five meetings for the discussion group and six meetings for the coaching groups over 12 weeks from September to December 2017.

The researcher was also the program initiator and participated in all group sessions across the three groups. At the conclusion of the group meetings, the program initiator interviewed two members of coaching group A, two members of coaching group B, three members of the discussion group, and one participant who attended both coaching group A and the discussion

group. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured schedule, allowing for maximum flexibility during the interview process while maintaining a focus on the specific data required from all respondents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants received an anonymous survey gathering perceptual and attendance data with nine participants responding. Interview and survey questions are included in Appendices C and D, with these questions focusing on individual and group perceptions of benefits, drawbacks, and important elements of the program relative to leadership and communication. Interview data was transcribed using a professional service, and survey data was compiled using Microsoft Forms and Excel.

Research Design

This formative program evaluation is a cumulative desk review of documents, and all analysis was conducted using data from the program survey and interviews. The data collected for this study was analyzed using an inductive approach to qualitative analysis. Discussion groups have been used in past studies (Garrett, 2008), and although the program was initially proposed solely as a coaching initiative, some participants voiced a desire to engage in discussion as opposed to coaching. This presented a unique opportunity to compare the perceptions of participants in the discussion group to those of the two separate coaching groups.

All participants who took part in the survey and interviews had the opportunity to review the data once it was de-identified. This allowed participants the opportunity to check for accuracy and to note any information they deemed as potentially identifying. Three participants responded to this opportunity, one with a request to remove a name that had been overlooked, and the others with minor spelling corrections. All suggestions offered by participants were implemented before analysis.

Analysis

Formative program evaluation targets the improvement of a program through the identification of strengths and weaknesses found in the specific program's setting (Patton, 2015). This approach to qualitative analysis is appropriate as this study sought to uncover the pertinent perceptions of the participants in School District X's (SDX) pilot coaching effort. The researcher is a credentialed professional coach through the International Coach Federation and a former development coach within SDX. For this reason, he used an inductive approach to content analysis in an attempt to mitigate any bias he may bring to the coding process. Inductive coding seeks to "identify patterns or themes within qualitative data without entering the analysis with preconceived analytical categories" (Patton, 2015, p. 551). The researcher coded the data in three rounds.

Coding

The first round employed an open or initial coding approach (Creswell, 2015; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014; Saldana, 2016). Initial coding, as described by Saldana (2016) has at its center an intention of remaining open to all possible directions suggested by a researcher's interpretation of the data. It is an appropriate first stage coding choice for this research as the purpose of the study is to discover administrators' perceptions of the dialogic coaching program and how they perceive that support impacting their leadership and communication at the school level. An initial coding approach can range from the descriptive to the conceptual to the theoretical, depending on what the researcher is observing and the knowledge and experience the researcher brings to the work (Saldana, 2016). An inductive approach, employing *in vivo* coding, process coding, attribute coding, and versus coding, was used to identify the patterns and themes that were expressed by participants.

The second round of coding used a focused coding approach to qualitative analysis. Saldana (2016) stated that focused coding was also called intermediate coding by Charmaz (as cited in Saldana, 2016) and that it often follows *in vivo* and initial coding. Focused coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, and seeks to develop categories by searching for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data (Saldana, 2016). This process, executed through the use of the qualitative analysis tool NVivo 11 for Mac, recoded the data, looking to refine existing codes or to create new codes altogether. These efforts reflect the decision-making process outlined by Charmaz (2014) who stated that a qualitative researcher must make “decisions about which codes make the most analytic sense” (p. 138). Codes and categories in this phase of the study arose from examples within the data supporting the analysis. They were then compared and contrasted with other codes and categories and with examples in the dataset.

The third round of coding was axial coding, a process that Saldana (2016) described as an extension of the analytic work of Initial and Focused coding. This step in the analysis held as its purpose the determination of which codes in the research are dominant and which are less critical. The process sought to reorganize the dataset by eliminating synonyms, removing redundant codes, or combining categories through an examination of their properties or dimensions (Saldana, 2016). This process placed an emerging concept or key code at the center of a code cluster and connected it to other codes graphically, creating salient categories.

Key to the entire process was the use of analytic memos. An analytic memo is “a brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes about the data” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 95). The memos did not just describe or summarize the data but synthesized the data into higher levels of meaning or deeper analysis. The analytic

memos created for this study noted emerging codes and patterns and suggested possible connections among codes, patterns, and potential categories. They elucidated code choices and distinguished between similar codes and usages, and revealed potential supporting or disproving quotes for future reference. In each stage of the analysis, the author also created disproving memos as an attempt to mitigate personal bias. These memos examined emerging codes, categories and eventually themes to question the appropriateness of their creation by comparing them directly to the data they represented. Through the disproving memos, the author asked if other codes or categories would be more plausible or if the chosen code or category was wrongly assigned or poorly interpreted, with specific attention to a bias toward the positive effects of coaching. In the examination of this bias through disproving memos, the researcher asked the questions “Is this accurate or am I looking to prove that coaching works? Are there other ways to see this that makes more sense?” In many cases alternate codes or categories were considered, with some codes or categories being changed or refined as a result. Within each round of coding, and especially through analytic note taking, the researcher identified patterns by connecting similarities in data across or within individual interviews or survey responses.

Generating Themes

Theme generation was the next analytic task for this formative program evaluation. Saldana (2016) described themes as “extended phrases or sentences that identify what a unit of data is about or what it means” (p. 199). Themes can be statements presented by participants that summarize what is going on, that can explain what is happening or why things have occurred in a certain way (Saldana, 2016). As Saldana (2016) also stated, themes are discerned during data collection and initial analysis and subsequently examined further as the analytical work progresses. The themes that arose from the data were further examined through the use of

analytic memos and disproving memos, resulting in four themes that are described in chapter four.

Participant Rights

As an SDX employee, the researcher was tasked with the de-identification of the data, which was completed prior to any inquiry using program artifacts. All names of individuals, schools, or other people referenced in the data were removed and/or replaced with a pseudonym. Further, SDX offered each participant the opportunity to review raw data before the study began. This provided participants with the opportunity to identify any information that they deemed potentially harmful and to alert the researcher to any potential personal or professional risk. Three participants chose to review the data, finding one potential piece of identifying information, which was subsequently removed.

This formative program evaluation de-identified the district as well as participants at the request of the superintendent of educational services responsible for research (see Appendix A). The only reference to the district included in the study is School District X (SDX), and identifying information such as student or teacher populations, performance statistics, or geographical information was generalized to increase the possibility of anonymity. All participants in the program were notified that group interactions are inherently insecure and efforts to preserve anonymity cannot be 100% effective. The potential for members to speak to others outside of the group about group interactions was inescapable, even if the program asked for confidentiality (which it did explicitly). The rights of the district were taken into consideration by securing explicit permission of the district and of individuals to use all program data and artifacts for the purposes of publishing, with the above described privacy measures enacted.

Potential Limitations and Delimitations

A qualitative approach to formative program evaluation presents certain limitations and delimitations. One delimitation is the size and context of the study. The study was situated in a unique location in western Canada, with a group size of 17. This site hosted the study as it was the only site immediately available to the researcher and the size of the group allowed for research to be completed in a reasonable time frame. Findings will therefore be impossible to generalize, although they may be able to offer insights for consideration of other studies looking to provide greater generalizability. A limitation was the position the researcher holds as an employee and coach within the district, and the varied familiarity he has with the participants in the program. The researcher participated in all groups, making notes and collecting data as the program unfolded. As the researcher initially proposed the program and extended the invitation to all SBAs in the district, he had immediate access to all documents, recordings, and internal efforts employed in the development, execution and review of the program. Permission to use all data was secured through the superintendent of human resources and senior administration, as all aspects of the pilot program came to a close before this study began.

The position of the researcher as a leader in the district, originator of the program, and chief data collector for the project presents other challenges. First, as all participants have a varied professional familiarity and contact with the researcher, they may change the way they act in group sessions and may consider or change responses to questions in interviews or focus groups. This has the potential to affect the validity of the data that the study used. The study employed an anonymous exit survey through an online platform in an attempt to lessen the impact of these relationships. Participants also had an opportunity to review raw data in an attempt to clarify any statements that did not represent accurate perceptions.

Finally, the process through which the program was developed presents another limitation. As volunteers were solicited and only 17 of 56 administrators participated, there is a chance that the results of this study are influenced by a potential predisposition to professional development. A larger study that allows for other means of entry into such a program would provide deeper insight into the effectiveness of a coaching approach to leadership development.

Conclusion

A qualitative approach to formative program evaluation offers the opportunity to identify successes and challenges within a program. Investigating a pilot program using inductive qualitative analysis may help to identify important elements that participants found critical to leadership and communication development within a locally developed leadership coaching program. The feedback that arose from this approach offers a unique opportunity to improve a program that aims to address the lived challenges of school-based leaders.

The evaluation of a pilot program that targets leadership development through coaching and discussion presents many challenges. Without tying evaluation through to student learning, it is difficult to determine whether or not the program met outcomes relative to effective leadership (Hattie, 2009). This study evaluated the program based solely on the perceived effects of the coaching and discussion efforts on leaders' conceptualizations of leadership and communication. This first step in program evaluation offers the opportunity to determine if such a program is seen as worthwhile in the eyes of participants. With an inductive approach to analysis (Saldana, 2015), this program evaluation may also elucidate the conceptualization and development of leadership as evidenced in the interactions during coaching and discussion sessions. These observations offer qualitative evidence of the program's effects for SDX.

Chapter four will present the results of the constant comparative discourse analysis,

outlining overarching themes grounded in contextual data. It will identify the parallels and points of tension within and between the two types of groups. Chapter five will outline an interpretation of the findings the potential uses of the results for individuals and organizations. It will present a contextualization of the work within the larger bodies of educational coaching and leadership, and will discuss the dissemination of results. Finally, the work will conclude with recommendations for further study and describe the significance of the study moving forward.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Principals and vice-principals (school-based administrators) are critical in the development of a highly functional school. The nature of their school-based leadership is dynamic and complex, and continues to evolve and expand, providing challenges in administration, communication, relationship building, and culture (Aas, 2017; Bush, 2009; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2010). The role of school-based administrators (SBAs) has grown to include an expectation that leaders demonstrate curricular and assessment knowledge while setting up an environment that allows teachers to flourish and students to see increased levels of performance (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). SBAs often face these challenges without a robust structure for support and development, which leaves the leader and the school community at risk of well-intentioned but counterproductive cultural and leadership behaviors that can have negative impacts on student learning (Bogler, 2001; DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014; Robertson, 2016; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). Coaching has been an effective tool for the development and support of SBAs and has expanded in both practical application and academic research since the turn of the millennium (Aguilar, 2017; Flückiger et al., 2017; Lindle et al., 2017). An investigation into leadership coaching for SBAs, with a focus on peer dialogic group coaching, provided an opportunity to explore the perceptions of this type of support at the school leadership level.

Chapter four will begin with an outline of the analytical approach that was used to explore the perceptions of K–12 principals and vice-principals of the impacts of a peer dialogic coaching and discussion program on their communication and leadership skills. It will continue with a presentation and description of the four themes that arose from the analytical process,

presenting each of the four in turn and revealing how these themes emerged. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of the themes and a description of the links among the data, analysis, problem statement, and purpose of the study.

Analysis

School District X (SDX) conducted a pilot program aimed at developing and supporting school-based administrators (SBAs) across the organization. The program began in June 2017 with an invitation to all administrators to participate in the voluntary pilot that started in August of 2017. A total of 17 administrators attended the introductory sessions, with 14 participating in the program once the sessions began in September 2017. The participants, although invited to engage in a coaching program, expressed an interest in creating a discussion group in addition to the coaching groups. One discussion group of seven administrators and two coaching groups of four and five administrators were formed, with the project initiator included as part of the total in every group (without the initiator, groups consisted of six, three, and four participants, respectively). The project initiator, who was also the researcher and author of this study, conducted semi-structured exit interviews with eight of the participants, including two participants from the discussion group, two participants from coaching group A, two participants from coaching group B and one participant that was involved with both coaching group A and the discussion group. The project initiator also offered an anonymous online survey to all participants in the program through the use of Microsoft Forms, which garnered eight responses (see appendices C and D for all questions used for the semi-structured interviews and the anonymous online survey). A professional transcription service transcribed the interviews, and the survey results were compiled using Microsoft Excel. As required by SDX, all participants in the program had the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and to decline

participation in the ensuing study. Three participants replied with minor adjustments to the data, correcting spelling mistakes and asking for the removal of one piece of identifying information.

As the aim of formative program evaluation is the improvement of a program through the identification of strengths and weaknesses found in the specific program's setting (Patton, 2015), this study sought to uncover the pertinent perceptions of the participants in the SDX pilot effort. The researcher and author of this study was given written permission to use the dataset that was created by SDX for research and publication (see appendix A). An inductive approach to qualitative analysis served as the main tool to balance any bias that may impact the analytical process, as the researcher is an employee of SDX and has extensive training as a coach. Inductive coding seeks to "identify patterns or themes within qualitative data without entering the analysis with preconceived analytical categories" (Patton, 2015, p. 551). The researcher raised participant perceptions through three distinct rounds of coding, and while it is impossible to ignore the bias, experience, and knowledge that a researcher brings to a qualitative effort (Patton, 2015), inductive coding allowed the author to work with an open mind to the extent that it was possible. An inductive approach to coding provided an opportunity for the researcher to be mindful of the impacts of the knowledge and skills he brought to the work, and allowed him to interpret the data with a wider appreciation of thematic possibilities.

Coding

The first round employed an open or initial coding approach (Creswell, 2015; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014; Saldana, 2016). An initial coding approach can range from the descriptive to the conceptual to the theoretical, depending on what the researcher is observing and the knowledge and experience the researcher brings to the work (Saldana, 2016). This study applied an inductive approach, using *in vivo* coding, process coding, attribute coding, and versus

coding, to identify the patterns and themes that were expressed by participants. The first round of initial coding produced 107 codes that described multiple aspects of participant perceptions, including feelings, logistics, and observations. This first round of coding also produced initial insights into possible categories and emerging connections among the data. The researcher performed the first round of coding by going through the data after having copied it into Microsoft Word, and identified codes line by line in the initial steps of the analysis.

The second round of coding took a focused approach to qualitative analysis. This process, which used the qualitative analysis tool NVivo 11 for Mac, brought the number of codes to 83. Through the use of this Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), the researcher carefully reexamined the entire data corpus and recoded it as it was entered into the software. In this step, codes were grouped to create tentative categories. These categories were compared to each other to determine appropriate boundaries, and some codes were subsumed into others or deleted altogether. As Charmaz (2014) stated that the researcher must make decision about which codes make the most sense within the analytical frame, the 83 codes identified in this step served as a staging point for the creation of potential categories. These codes and categories were substantiated or disproved using participant perceptions from the data.

Axial coding is a process that Saldana (2016) described as an extension of the analytic work of Initial and Focused coding. This approach constituted the third step in the analysis and held as its purpose the determination of which codes in the research are dominant and which are less critical. Emerging concepts or key codes stood at the center of code clusters and were connected to other codes graphically, leading to refined categories. The final result of this round of analysis was eight main categories with a total of 68 codes. Larger categories or more

impactful codes subsumed smaller or less significant codes. As an example, codes such as *Group Size*, *Principal / Vice Principal*, and *Veteran vs. Beginner* were all amalgamated into *Group Dynamics* as each of these codes described participant perceptions of how effective groups could be created considering position, experience, and number of participants. Any data included in these codes that did not refer to group constitution were re-coded in the appropriate alternate code. For example, some data that referred to what topics or insights a veteran or beginning leader might bring to the group that was directly related to experience was recoded as *Learning from Examples*. Other pieces of data that did not fit any new or reformatted codes were either discarded (if they were redundant) or appropriately recoded as well, in some cases creating a new code altogether.

Throughout the entire process the researcher used analytic memos. An analytic memo is “a brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes about the data” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 95). The memos sought to examine the codes and emerging categories on a higher level, comparing the codes and categories to the data and outlining possible connections between codes and identifying patterns. Disproving memos aided the researcher in the attempt to mitigate bias, questioning codes and categories and seeking evidence to dispute the connections and groupings that emerged. In some cases these disproving memos led to new categories or refined conceptualizations, and offered the researcher the opportunity to question whether a conclusion was grounded in the data or if it was a product of researcher bias.

Within each round of coding, and especially through analytic note taking, the researcher identified patterns by connecting similarities in data across or within individual interviews or survey responses. For example, in discerning the code *Relevant*, the following excerpts denoted

the importance of discussions and exchanges based in real-life working situations. Participant A described a need:

to spend time focusing on the things that were forefront and present in our day-to-day interactions with our staff, and students, and families in our schools. I liked that it was practical, and hands-on, and meaningful. Like it wasn't, I didn't feel it was contrived.

Survey respondent E wrote: "I was eager to attend and participate in each session as I knew that the topics we discussed would be relevant to my current practice."

Participant C said, "We're sitting here with someone across the table from you that you know is actually living this; it seemed way more real, and for me it was way more authentic."

Each of these excerpts was interpreted as a direct appreciation of program topics based in work experience, making the coaching or discussion process relevant to participants individually. It was initially coded using *in vivo* coding from survey respondent E as *Relevant* and similarities were noted through analytic memos and close examinations of the data and other codes as the analysis progressed.

Generating Themes

Theme generation brought codes and categories together in larger units of understanding, creating opportunities for deep understanding. Themes are extended phrases or sentences that describe what a unit of data means, and can be statements presented by participants that summarize what is going on, that can explain what is happening, or why things have occurred in a certain way (Saldana, 2016). As themes are discerned during data collection and initial analysis and subsequently examined further as the analytical work progresses, the eight categories that arose through the coding of the data corpus emerged as potential themes for the work as a whole. In examining the eight categories, four themes stood out as fitting the pattern of the program as

discussed by participants in the interviews and surveys (see appendices E through H). Each theme holds a distinct but integral part of the whole when examining participant perceptions, and the process of theming the data involved multiple efforts at finding common elements among many of the categories and attempting many different combinations of codes, categories, and concepts.

Many participants in this study had experience analyzing and discussing their experiences that stemmed from past efforts in both district development programs and graduate education. Each participant and respondent took time to reflect and offered valuable insights. As such, a large number of responses were included verbatim, as the study sought to use participants' voices to elucidate the profound concepts that emerged from interviews and survey responses.

Results

A formative program evaluation is limited by the fact that it examines only the program and participants in question (Patton, 2015). The results of this study therefore reflect only the perceptions of those leaders from School District X (SDX) who participated in the pilot support and development program. While chapter five will connect these perceptions to the literature surrounding coaching and leadership in education, these results are not intended to represent group dialogic coaching or discussion group efforts or outcomes beyond the scope of this program. The findings of this study are not generalizable, transferable, or replicable as the formative evaluation process was focused solely on a small, bounded system.

The responses offered by program participants were thoughtful and reflective, and may suggest possible considerations for others within and perhaps even beyond the district, but cannot represent perceptions from outside of the SDX initiative. Participants in both the coaching and discussion groups shared perceptions that are explored within chapter four unless otherwise

indicated, as there were many similar perceptions among the groups. Chapter five will address this aspect of the study specifically as it treats research sub-question three, which asks about the different perceptions that emerged from group dialogic coaching participants compared to discussion group participants. Although there were a number of elements that were unique to the coaching program, there were many common aspects among formats that arose when looking at meaningful development and support for leaders. Elements specific to one format or the other will be noted.

The coding process revealed that participants in the SDX group dialogic peer coaching and discussion program made deep and frequent references that have been organized into distinct themes within the pilot initiative. The first theme, *Setting the Stage*, describes the necessary pre-conditions and obstacles for meaningful support and development. The second, *Shared Presence*, describes how people participated as partners in the program to create growth and support. The third, *Living the Learning*, identifies the opportunities and obstacles within the program process leading to or detracting from growth and development. Finally, the fourth theme, *The Value of Partnership*, identifies responses elucidating the effects of the program for participants both at a personal and organizational level. Each of these themes will be presented and described using the words, stories, and examples communicated by participants. As participants expressed concerns regarding anonymity, even if consistently identified by a pseudonym such as ‘participant A’, they are often identified simply as ‘participant’ within the study. All interview and survey respondents are represented chapters four and five.

Theme One: Setting the Stage

The first theme, *Setting the Stage*, outlines the preconditions and obstacles that participants identified when responding to questions such as “What made it easy or difficult to

participate?”, “What would you change or keep the same about the program moving forward”, and “What are the strengths or drawbacks of the coaching or discussion program?” The responses to these and other questions highlighted elements participants considered important at the outset of the program. These responses reflected the purpose of the study, which was to discover administrators’ perceptions of the dialogic coaching program and how they perceived that development and support impacting their leadership and communication at the school level. *Setting the Stage* identified participants’ perceptions of the factors that must be in place for development and support to take place in an effective way, outlining roadblocks and opportunities. This theme, as it emerged from the data, provided feedback appropriate to research questions one and three, which were *How do K–12 principals and vice-principals perceive the impact of dialogic peer coaching on their communication and leadership skills?*, and, *What are the different perceptions that emerge from dialogic peer coaching groups compared to a peer discussion group?* In raising participant perceptions, *Setting the Stage* highlights not only what participants thought of the experience and how it related to their leadership practice but it also provided some contrast between the coaching group experience and the discussion group experience, thereby further illuminating the perceived experience of those involved.

Throughout this theme participants identified the logistics and mindset they viewed as critical not only for deep impact on their own leadership and communication practice but also for participation in a meaningful development experience. Many participants stated that in order to impact leadership practice a program must take into account factors such as time and location. Other perceived factors include the program’s ability to address leadership practice in real time and group exchanges grounded in common experience. Overall, this theme outlines concerns that participants believed must be addressed as any program begins, and offers some foundational

conditions that were identified as impactful for leadership and communication development.

Setting the Stage is separated into two subthemes; *Creating the Environment* and *Understanding the Conditions*.

Subtheme 1.1—Creating the Environment

Creating the Environment looks primarily at the logistics of the coaching program.

Included in this subtheme are factors such as time commitment, location, and group composition.

The most commonly mentioned challenge of this theme, if not of the entire study, is finding the time. Every participant and every survey respondent identified time as a critical factor when looking at program potential or success. The first thing most participants identified was a lack of available time within an incredibly full day. Participant C, when asked about challenges to participation stated:

Time, right? Always time. And we can't get away from that, but we know time is always our drawback. Even trying to find a time that works for everyone. We know during the day definitely doesn't work, and with everyone's own personal and [athletic] coaching and all the different things that you do, after school doesn't always work.

One survey respondent echoed this concern:

Other commitments and realities that are simply part of busy schedules. The time of the meetings and other aspects of the administrative tasks that can come up and prevent you from attending. Adding another date to my schedule was challenging.

Although the creation of time within a busy working schedule often proved difficult for participants, the perception that this time was worthwhile surfaced throughout the data. Often participants who showed initial hesitation to committing to a volunteer program on their own

time grew to enjoy and look forward to sessions, even though they consistently identified a very challenging workload.

All groups met at seven in the morning on days of their groups' choosing, and although it was difficult for them to attend in many circumstances, they frequently referred to the importance and value of such meetings. Participant A noted:

. . .the drawback I'm going to speak of is not relative to this program specifically, but a thought I had is that it takes this sort of an initiative by yourself and our volunteer time at 7:00 in the morning to get to participate in these valuable discussions. I have to volunteer my time and get up extra early to meet with other like-minded individuals, purely voluntarily to get some of the best PD I've had in years.

The underlying tone of frustration with volunteering personal time for professional development was often offset by specific observations of the benefits of early morning group sessions.

Some of the specific benefits of meeting in the morning were the clarity or lack of interruptions that come with early morning efforts. Participant H noted, "First thing in the day I think was good. Because although we were tired I think we were fresher, and maybe not as, for the most part, as bogged down with all the other things in the day, right?" Not all participants, however, identified positive benefits. One survey respondent who indicated that they attended fewer than three sessions stated:

It was difficult to attend meetings at 7:00 a.m. It makes for a very long day with an already busy and stressful job. It was difficult for me to attend sessions in October as there were circumstances at school that needed attention.

The challenge of finding the time was often but not always offset by the value that participants perceived in the program's efforts.

Many expressed increasing appreciation and excitement as the program went on, as one participant noted “Well, obviously seven o’clock in the morning was difficult, but it was okay. I got used to it, and ended up looking forward to it.” The ultimate indicator of participant willingness to find time in their busy schedules to participate in this professional development lies in the fact that 12 of the 14 participants expressed an interest in continuing with the program. Many continued after the pilot on a volunteer basis, often with a meeting frequency of every two weeks and a meeting duration of one hour, as perceptions of these factors were positive among the few that noted them.

Group dynamics. Another perception of challenge and opportunity within the subtheme of setting the stage included group size and composition. Many participants indicated that small groups allowed for the quick establishment of trust. While there were other factors influencing trust that will be discussed later, participants often identified small groups of between four and six participants as a positive size for group cohesion. One survey respondent elucidated on potential reasons for this when they noted “I think that the small group is key to the coaching. No one can hide. Everyone has a role to play and needs to play it in order for the group to work successfully.” Participants often compared the small groups of four to six to the larger groups of 10 to 20 commonly used to address professional development at district administrative meetings, expressing a unanimous preference for smaller numbers. Approximately half of the participants communicated some perceptions of the composition of the groups themselves. Perceptions were split between those that favored homogeneous groups of vice-principals and principals and those that favored groups that had a balance between the two positions. In regard to experience, most thought that groups should contain both veteran and beginning administrators, even going so far as to express a desire to solicit more veteran leaders for future conversations. Participant B

stated:

I also think that more veteran people and more new people are good to have together . . . sometimes if you have all new people, you haven't really lived through everything. Maybe a group of all veteran people would be okay too, but I think it helps the new people to have the veteran contacts.

The value of veteran wisdom often accompanied responses expressing a perception of group dynamics, as one survey respondent noted:

I was able to better understand the experiences and leadership lessons/examples due to the contributions of the senior members of the group. I believe that it is absolutely crucial and cannot be learned through a textbook or in a class.

A deeply appreciated aspect of group construction was the fact that leaders had the option to participate in either a coaching or discussion group. Those who identified this choice stated that it paved the way for more active and intrinsically motivated participation. This perception will be examined at greater length in the next theme as it also related very well to the concept of participant-driven development.

Location. The last aspect of this subtheme concerned location, with those who addressed the issue being split between proponents of one central location and proponents of varied locations to accommodate group members living in different parts of the city. Those who perceived location as a barrier often coupled the observation with particular living challenges such as having small children or living far from the group meeting spaces. Those who saw it as an opportunity coupled the perception with a sense of fairness and in some cases the chance to reflect after a session during a longer drive to school.

Subtheme 1.2—Understanding the Conditions

The second subtheme within the identification of key preconditions for group success addresses the mindset participants noted as being critical at the beginning of the program. The factor perceived most often as essential for group success when it comes to understanding the conditions was the idea that the coaching or discussion work must be relevant. Every participant in the study mentioned the value of working with scenarios that were happening in real time for themselves or colleagues. In addition to the *relevant* code examples cited in the description of theme and categories creation, one participant noted:

Then just for me learning more about the coaching model. I did the training, which was good. But, when you're in that . . . it's artificial, right? You can see the example and you can see the model but this stuff was real life and this was what was happening to me.

Issues that were happening to me. Issues that were happening to my colleagues.

Participant G added, “We had that practice opportunity, and yet, it wasn't just practice because we were actually dealing with real things, so it was meaningful and hence why it had a bigger impact on us, scenarios that were real life.” While comparing the coaching groups to other types of coach training, participants often noted the perceived value of dialogue stemming from real practice. Participant L noted:

I guess my bias coming into this was I didn't see, and not to say anything against the coaching training, but I didn't really see the value of coaching until I sat down around this table with the people that were involved and saw how it could be applied to real-life situations.

Participants elaborated on the nature of relevance when they specifically noted the importance of the consideration of student and staff needs. Some also noted that program interactions must take

into account the responsibilities that leaders carry on a daily basis. Group members indicated that these considerations were urgent and ongoing. As participant K stated:

If students aren't being supported, aren't being treated with care and attention, aren't learning, then it needs to be addressed. And it needs to be addressed right away. I think that's a part of leadership . . . that came through in everybody's conversations.

The relevance of the discussion not only brought an authenticity to the work but constituted a critical understanding between participants which facilitated engagement in meaningful development. Participants appreciated that most were facing the same types of challenges and that this reinforced the value of the interactions. As participant I noted:

One of the things that really encouraged me was just the commonality of our experiences when we were sitting and talking. So, realizing that it's not only me who is facing these similar issues. These are things that people are seeing in all of their buildings and issues that everybody is dealing with. It made me feel more a part of our admin team in our division.

More than an appreciation, the relevant nature of the exchanges differentiated it from past development efforts that participants perceived as less effective right from the outset. As such it became a factor that exists not only as an appreciated benefit of the program but as a precondition necessary for program success.

Open-mindedness. Another mindset that was important to most participants was an open-minded approach to the coaching and discussion groups. The main determiner of this open-mindedness was the voluntary nature of the program. Almost all participants referenced the choice to participate as an important factor in creating an open-minded approach. Participant D noted:

I would recommend I guess having this be optional because I think for me, the coaching training was a requirement. I went into it I was like, “Oh okay I have to do this ’cuz it’s my job.” So, for me initially it didn't turn me off but I wasn’t as engaged as I would have been if I had done this sort of thing first and then done the coaching training.

Participants noted direct connections between the optional nature of the program and the ability to extract value. One participant remarked:

I just know my admin partner at school thinks I’m . . . crazy for getting up at 7:00 in the morning and going to these meetings. He would not see the value in it because it’s just not his. . . . He’s not a guy who’d sit around and talk and hash things out whereas I am. I would really be open to being a part of this. I appreciate that it was my choice.

Almost all participants were cognizant of the value of choice regarding participation, either in the program as whole or in the choice between discussion and coaching formats, and communicated the perception that choice was a critical element.

Participant-driven. The concept of choice extended beyond the option to participate. A final perception that arose as being an essential precondition of the program was that it be participant-driven. The ability to determine which topics of group interactions enhanced the relevance of the sessions, as participants were in control of and deeply engaged in the dialogue. In the case of the discussion group, this took the form of specific topic determination. One survey participant noted:

The strength of the program also rested in the format of the meetings. The meetings did not have a set agenda and the individuals involved contributed as little or as much as they felt comfortable with. As we progressed through the meetings, we became more comfortable with each other leading to some very good, relevant discussions focusing on

issues common to all members of the group.

Within the coaching groups, the nature of participant direction was perceived more as giving space and time to group members to progress as individually needed within the coaching model.

Participant L noted:

It was very participant-driven, which I think it's supposed to be. So, I think we stayed true to that. The fact that yourself as the initiator, understanding that we were at all different places, on the continuum of being comfortable with the model, just allowing us at times where we needed to kind of sit back and just observe, allowing space for that.

The fact that coaching itself requires that the coachee choose the topic of the interaction reinforces the perception expressed by group participants. Both groups drew distinct parallels between being in control of the conversation and the value of the program as being relevant to participants' working lives.

Setting the Stage as a theme raised many of the bedrock conditions that participants viewed as essential to a meaningful development program. While participants did not often refer to elements within the subthemes as being preconditions per se, the nature of participant perceptions was such that they shone through the data as essential underlying considerations that would be necessary to move on to healthy partnerships and processes. Participants not only expressed an awareness of time constraints, group dynamics, participant control, and relevancy, but pointed to them as essential for getting early potential roadblocks out of the way of quality development. With these roadblocks considered, participants next outlined the type of presence required for a quality coaching or discussion experience.

Theme Two: Shared Presence

The second theme, *Shared Presence*, examines group members' perceptions of participatory thoughts and behaviors. This theme looks at how participants viewed the ways that they and others took part in group activities and how these perceived thoughts and behaviors influenced group development and support. These perceptions ranged from an awareness of one's own thoughts and assumptions and how they impacted group progress to perceptions of what others did to engage in a trusting partnership. The identified problem of practice for this study outlined the necessity of commonly understood leadership and communication practices in order to improve student learning outcomes (Bogler, 2001; Hattie, 2009; Robinson, 2011; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). Recognizing the importance of connecting leaders, School District X identified leadership development and support as an opportunity for organizational improvement (Superintendent of Human Resources, personal communication, May 25, 2016). As such, *Shared Presence* offered insight into the perceptions of administrators surrounding the way that they interacted with each other and how they approached these interactions with different biases and assumptions.

The theme contains two subthemes that look at these perceptions more closely. The first, *Purposeful intention*, is an exploration of self-perceptions. This subtheme includes how participants identified an awareness of their own desire for personal growth, what they did to overcome obstacles to growth, and how they were able to put their own thoughts aside in an attempt to understand others. The second subtheme, *Contributing to the group*, examines participant perceptions of the ways in which they partnered with others to create growth and support. This subtheme includes perceptions of how group members engaged in developing trust, and how they perceived the creation of safety or comfort within coaching or discussion groups.

The second subtheme also concentrates more on the exchanges among participants rather than the internal dialogue of individuals. The two subthemes are distinct, as the first subtheme outlines the way individuals must be aware of their own thinking and predispositions in order to keep those notions from becoming obstacles; the second looks at how participants will intentionally commit to group cohesion.

Subtheme 2.1 – Purposeful Intention

This subtheme focuses on self-perceptions of mindset, with the first and most popular element being intrinsic growth. Intrinsic growth was a code that emerged frequently in the data and pointed to a desire on the part of participants to engage in meaningful development activities that will benefit them as individuals professionally. Participant J exemplified this approach, stating, “You have to challenge yourself, so it’s a bit of a challenge again to know it’s okay if you’re not good at this. This is why you’re here is to get better, so stick yourself on this side and learn something.” This perception of intrinsic growth was closely tied to school leadership. While participants occasionally identified personal development as a topic of group interactions, it was clear that professional development was the main focus of the program. An important emergence was that participants held an intention to expand their skills and abilities in leadership and communication through dialogue with colleagues. Participant F expressed this sentiment by saying:

Having it go for six weeks was long enough to make me feel more comfortable with coaching. It’s something that I would like to see continued or just have access to as a professional with like-minded professionals in a work environment, I guess. Just have it outside of the people that I work with every day at my school have access to a group of people who wanted to continue it.

This aspect of the subtheme was shared across both discussion and coaching groups, as both mentioned it often as a strength.

Uncertain or uncomfortable. Another perception that many participants expressed was uncertainty or vulnerability that they held as they entered the program. Almost all participants, regardless of position or amount of experience, admitted that they wondered if they had meaningful contributions to offer. Participant F described the thought “Okay, am I going to have enough? Are they really pushy? No, she’s only been in this gig for [shorter amount of time]. I maybe had that little bit of fear, Do I have anything?”

Experienced principals were not immune to these thoughts, as participant M explains:

As far as some of the things I was concerned about, I was concerned that I might be timid, I might not have anything to bring to the group. I might not fully participate and be able to add to the group’s discussions. But that was okay. That didn’t happen.

Other self-perceptions included an awareness of how leaders might be perceived by others.

Participant K alluded to these feelings, stating:

I questioned whether or not I should be there and I questioned, “Well, do I need this? Or am I going to look like I’m desperate for help and attention and that’s why I’m here? And will that be the perception of others?” . . . But at the end, I decided that the benefits would far outweigh any of my perceived notions. And I sort of pushed by ego out of the way. I’m glad I did.

The movement beyond these reservations proved to be the key for many participants in getting to a place of partnership. As participants often stated that being able to move past these initial uncertainties or vulnerabilities created a pathway for all group members to engage in open and trusting relationships, as it modeled a willingness to participate no matter the comfort level.

Meeting them where they're at. The final important aspect of this subtheme is the participants' awareness of how they were relating to the other group members. This aspect was particular to the coaching groups in the interviews, and was drawn directly from multiple participants' usage of the phrase "meeting them where they're at." This aspect of the group experience reflects a shift in the thinking of the participant. This shift represents a departure from an unconscious perspective of how they are listening, to a conscious effort to deeply understand the person being coached and their personal context, with no agenda to impose and no direction to offer. Participant L noted:

I'm new in this position, the whole idea of wanting to as a leader, to be that person who can connect with people in that way and connect with people where they're at not necessarily where I'm at with my agenda, with what's going on in my office but meeting people where they're at. Then, just helping them move on to a different space.

That looks different for everybody too so just realizing that one solution for one person isn't going to be the right solution for another person depending where they're at. Then also just allowing me the place to reflect on who I am as a leader and who I want to be as a leader. That is still is evolving.

The concept of meeting people "where they're at" signalled an expression of freedom to some degree for a few participants. These coaching participants demonstrated greater lightness as they acknowledged that they cannot control other people's journeys, and that caring deeply for people doesn't mean that they must force the path. Participant I demonstrated elements of freedom in both utterance and observed body language when stating:

Letting them [coachees] get to the point where they can outline for themselves the solution that works best for them because ultimately that's what's most important. It's not

how I would deal with the situation but just how they can deal with the situation to be able to make it work for them. That's one thing. That's the biggest thing I think.

Group members who intentionally sought to meet people where they're at created for other participants a space of value and dignity. Many participants noted that this was an important takeaway that they would like to use in their daily practice.

Subtheme 2.2—Contributing to the Group

Subtheme 2.1, *Purposeful intention*, explored the self-perceptions of participants coming into the program and how participants intentionally addressed these conditions regardless of how others acted or responded in the group setting. Subtheme 2.2, *Contributing to the group*, examines the perceived factors that required interaction among participants to manifest growth and support. This subtheme shifts the perceptual focus from a unidirectional intention of participation to the bi- or multidirectional aspects of group participation. All of these aspects were deeply connected in the data, but distinct in individual descriptions. As such, they are not presented in any particular order, as one often was connected to or led to another.

Safety. One aspect of group interaction that arose through data analysis was the creation of emotional and relational safety for participants. This creation of safety is distinct from preconditions of the program and awareness of self because even if all preconditions are considered, and even if individuals are conscious of their intentions and actions, they may not move as a group into a pattern of behaviors that promotes safe and trusting communication. One of the early components of a safe environment that participants perceived was the establishment of confidentiality. All participants were informed at the outset that nothing would be reported to senior administration without first de-identifying and giving participants the opportunity to check the data for accuracy and anonymity. Participants expressed a trust in this confidentiality, as one

survey respondent noted that a strength of the program was “open, honest, and safe dialogue (reassured that any recordings or conversations would stay in the vault) [*sic*].” Group members found that the program was a safe place for exposing vulnerabilities and working on perceived areas of growth.

In regard to coaching specifically, another element of safety that participants referred to often was a separation of the group experience from daily work, which created a lower risk situation that participants frequently perceived as practice. Participant H noted:

I think there needs to be that continued practice in that safe environment. I’ve tried it in different times throughout when I felt it was appropriate, with kids, students, actually just on Friday, and with colleagues. . . . I think I would appreciate some more practice in it still. So I think that we could feel safe and comfortable then. Safer, more comfortable than when we’re practicing it in our jobs.

An aspect of safety that was shared by both discussion and coaching groups was a perceived lack of judgment. Participants in both groups described this lack of judgment as an important piece of the partnership experience. One coaching participant noted, “. . . the group was always very positive, and was never judgmental so that made it easy.” Discussion group participants shared a similar perception, with one stating:

I think that was the biggest thing was that it felt like a very safe environment in which you could spill if you needed to and that you knew that there was no judgment around that table ever. . . . Everybody was very open and willing to accept other people’s ideas, which you don’t always find in a discussion group.

The perceived lack of judgment may have contributed to a level of ease that might not be possible in discussion or coaching groups otherwise.

Validation. Group members were able to go beyond a lack of judgment when they validated each other in the group settings. In the coaching groups, validation was often described as someone working or struggling with you through a challenge. Participant G observed:

There's a lot of validation in the group, and a lot of understanding. I think that those are all really good components to a good leader. I think everyone was very sympathetic to each other, and each other's situations, and I think we've all lived through similar situations so we could all sit there and say I've been there.

Discussion group participants also perceived a level of validation, although it was voiced more as a connection or open invitation for consultation than a shared experience. Participant A stated it as:

Validating maybe, but I think it was a very validating experience to know that there are other people who also don't have the answers all the time. And who need to call other people, and I think I now have new people to add to my support group, which I didn't before.

Although the two formats differed in the way they perceived validation, all groups included validation and a lack of judgment as integral parts of team building.

Building trusting relationships. With safety established and validation sewn throughout group conversations, the building of trusting relationships was the next factor raised by participants in both the coaching and discussion formats. In the coaching groups, a sense of togetherness seemed to follow the perception of validation as people participated in meaningful exchanges. One coaching participant, when talking about group dialogue, put it this way:

Just having the time and as far as like building leadership skills and as a professional development practice, being able to sit down and hash things out with colleagues and

colleagues that I trust and colleagues that I respect. Being able to be affirmed with that. . . not feeling so isolated.

The togetherness described by coaching participants was often noted along with a natural building of trust, as participant G mentioned when they stated “I think that the fact that we were able to establish trust and openness and that just kind of happened organically.” Other members of the same group noted how quickly trust was developed once safety and validation were in place, stating “What was good for me was first of all the rapport that was developed between the participants so quickly. These were people that I didn't know all that well,” and “We just jelled. There was good trust.” These statements outlining trust and rapport are common among the participants who were part of the well-attended coaching group.

Discussion group participants also mentioned trust, but the nature of trust was different. Where trust among coaching participants elicited perceptions such as “jelling” and creating “rapport,” trust among discussion participants seemed to indicate openness as opposed to tight team building. One discussion group member’s response stated, “I think that was great, was just that trust. Maybe trust is the word, but just that open conversation where no one had to be right, no one had to be wrong.” No discussion group members discussed elements of jelling or coming together.

Participants differentiated between trust and safety when they perceived safety as distance from professional practice and an assurance that their work would remain confidential. Trust was described as a growing relationship in which they felt that other individuals understood them more deeply and that the exchanges became more professionally intimate than could be achieved through safety alone. Group members referenced interactional behaviors more frequently when discussing trust than they did discussing safety.

Impact of attendance. The last elements of this subtheme address attendance and effort at the group level. People mentioned attendance in both the coaching and discussion groups, but the perceptions were more strongly communicated by those engaged in the coaching groups. The coaching group that experienced sporadic attendance described more limited perceptions of trust than did the well-attended coaching group participants. One coaching participant in the less attended group noted “Okay, so for this group not really knowing who was in it, who wasn’t, . . . so drawbacks, yeah, not really knowing who would be here.” Another participant in the same group stated:

Well, I mean, once or twice I just showed up and it was just you and me, or one other person, right? So yeah, I think more participants would have given a little bit more of a . . . wider range of what’s going on in schools, a broader view.

Those who could attend more regularly never scorned the sporadic attendance in this coaching group, as they expressed an understanding of the demands of school-based leadership. While it is impossible to draw any relationship between trust and attendance in this study, a finding of note is that even in a situation where trust was perceived as more challenging, participants opined that it did indeed grow. One participant in the lesser-attended group mentioned “A drawback, I wouldn’t want to share anything that was really a problem, so the trust.” The same participant later clarified when asked about program benefits, mentioning that there were gains in trust.

So I guess that trust was, even though I said at the beginning trust [was a drawback]. But zero to 10 with zero at the beginning could bring me up to a six, and I’m pretty happy with that. With phoning one of the people saying. . . . Or even in the other coaching group, saying, hey, I know that you worked on the coaching model. What do you think of this? So zero to six for me is pretty good.

Attendance in the two coaching groups differed greatly, as one group had only one person miss one meeting, while the other coaching group had the full complement of members only once, with different people unable to attend from session to session.

The members of the regularly attended group also mentioned attendance specifically, with one noting:

I also think our coaching group was super committed. I think there was only one session where one person wasn't able to come, and everyone came to every other one, and was there and ready to present if they needed, or ready to be coached if they needed to.

The discussion group did refer to attendance as a factor, but the instances were few and the comments identified a wish of having all present for greater range of experience and contribution.

Everybody tried. Often mentioned with attendance was effort, and this element was captured by the in vivo code *Everybody tried*. Coaching group participant M mentioned “Everybody, everybody did their best to practice and try.” One discussion group participant, when discussing benefits of the program, noted that “everybody was actively participating.” This intentional effort seemed to bring together other aspects of previously mentioned themes such as the relevant nature of discussions and the intrinsic desire of people to participate. It took predispositions and moved them into the sphere of reciprocal action. One discussion group member stated:

The biggest positive is that people that were there really wanted to be there. And it was their professional development and they were willing to work on it. It wasn't just sit there and listen and I'm not gonna add anything. Everybody was there to participate out of choice.

One coaching group participant mentioned:

I think it's good that we were so intense, because I think we lived a real experience, more so than people not really buying in, or not really being into it, or not really wanting to participate. It was like our group all wanted to participate and jumped in. So I thought that was a really big strength.

The aspect of *Everybody tried* also highlights the complexity of the coaching program, and that all concepts, codes, subthemes, and themes are intricately interwoven and inseparable from the whole. It is a strong example of how groups can work together dynamically.

Shared Presence is a theme that works to illuminate the way that participants showed up to the coaching program. It began with self-perceptions of participant hesitations, intentions, and frames of mind and ended with perceptions of the complex interactional behaviors that influence group dynamics such as safety and trust. The *Shared Presence* theme takes the preconditions mentioned in *Setting the Stage* and offers insights on how to show up for one's self and for others as people participate in a discussion or dialogic peer coaching programs.

Theme Three: Living the Learning

The third theme revealed in analysis, *Living the Learning*, focuses on the perceptions of administrators as they related to the processes of peer dialogic group coaching or discussion. Perceptions that emerged from this theme offered feedback that could be used to address all three research questions. These perceptions outlined participants' perceptions of how the coaching process impacted their thinking and actions in the field of leadership, thereby responding to question one *How do K-12 principals and vice-principals perceive the impact of dialogic peer coaching on their communication and leadership skills?* Participants' perceptions described many examples of how they applied the coaching model in their practice and how this

application evolved, which answers to the second question, *What is the perceived impact of the group coaching experience on the participants' application of coaching strategies in the school environment?* Finally, there were many similar and contrasting perceptions that emerged in the data when examining the discussion and coaching processes, and these comparisons responded to question three, which was *What are the different perceptions that emerge from dialogic peer coaching groups compared to a peer discussion group?* *Living the Learning* examines how the processes of the program impacted participant conceptualizations of their own development and support.

The name for this theme was borne out of a discussion during a coaching session between the program initiator and a participant who was working to rectify a perceived lack of skill with the structures and application of the coaching model. The participant stated:

I had said to you at one point, maybe I need to read some books because learner's another one of my strengths, and you're like, "No, this is the learning. We're living the learning as we're doing it. The practice is the learning." I thought that was really good.

Participants in all the coaching and discussion groups voiced an awareness of the process in which they were involved. Participants in the coaching groups most often referred to this awareness as the coaching model, whereas discussion group participants described this process more frequently as a conversational structure, outlining the emerging informal and unwritten norms and roles of participation. This theme is distinct from *Shared Presence* as it focuses more on the process of creating development and support than it does the way in which people showed up. This theme is akin to formal and informal rules of the game and how players manipulate these rules. The theme of *Shared Presence*, by contrast, is intended to highlight the spirit of the game or the sportsmanship involved. If participants entered with a deep awareness of the

preconditions needed for quality growth and development, and an understanding of the individual and group presence required for success, but had no common understanding of the process of how to engage, then the development and support could be stalled in the eyes of participants. This is how *Living the Learning* is distinct from the previous two themes. It explores how participants perceived the structures and working participation in the program. Participants identified what they perceived as the rules of the game and how they played once engaged.

Living the Learning contains two subthemes: *Structures that framed growth and support* and *Ways people participated in growth and support*. In the first subtheme, participants outlined structural elements that they perceived were inherent to the coaching model or that they saw emerge from the discussion format. These perceptions included role definitions, rules of feedback, and expectations for accountability, among others. The second subtheme describes participant reflections on how they engaged with these structural elements, how they interpreted the rules. This theme includes moving people forward, trusting in the process, and looking for coaching opportunities. The two subthemes are distinct as group members pointed out that it is possible to understand roles and formats without bringing to these structures the necessary behaviors to make them work. Conversely, participants noted that it is possible to be enthusiastically committed to participation in the group constructs, but without a working knowledge of the roles and formats, it is difficult to engage. As with other parts of the study, all themes and subthemes are inseparable from one another in practice, but in the interest of a formative program evaluation, the separation of elements provides an opportunity to scrutinize the process as it unfolded in the eyes of participants.

Subtheme 3.1—Structures That Framed Growth and Support

This subtheme highlights very different responses from discussion group participants as compared to coaching group participants relative to the structures of the two approaches. Different perceptions are logical as the coaching initiative followed a distinct model whereas the discussion group, as a format that was generated by participants, simply created their own informal rules and expectations as the program evolved. The resultant perceptions of the different formats' processes reflected the distinct differences in structure.

Coaching model. Participants in the coaching group identified the model as a powerful tool for development and support. One participant noted:

Of the coaching group, I think the strength was the coaching model. I think the strength of the group was that it was so focused on coaching and as soon as you got away from coaching someone brought you back to coaching, and I think that was good.

All but one of the participants had undergone training provided by the district in the coaching model, but uncertainty around elements of the model kept leaders from using it widely. Participants noted their development in respect to some of those elements through the perceptions that follow.

Role definition. The coaching group identified role definition as an important part of the coaching structure. The project initiator explained in an introductory email that the program intended to engage in a peer dialogic group coaching model that places one person as the coachee and the other participants as co-coaches. In this structure, no particular individual was designated as the coach or leader. Participants demonstrated an understanding of the structure and its intent through their perceptions of clear roles. Participant L noted:

We'd identified one person who would bring their problem, and we almost, I feel like we assigned roles when we got there, and it was good. Sometimes you were the one being coached, and then we had to be the coaches, and so that was good . . . because we were dealing with real issues, it wasn't as contrived. Maybe the contrived part sometimes was at the beginning, feeling like, "Okay, this is the hat I'm putting on today, and being intentional about that hat," and as I said, you took your turn taking the different hats.

Variation of this perception were shared by all coaching participants, often through a reference to everyone participating in the coaching role together, or as participant G noted, "everyone had the same role." What was also very clear, however, was the difference between participating as one of the coaches and participating as the coachee, as demonstrated above. All participants were aware that one person would be taking the role of coachee and others were going to work together in the coaching.

Expert resource. One particular role of note in the coaching format was that of the project initiator, who assumed the role of researcher and author of this study once the project concluded. As the project initiator had extensive experience and training in coaching, participants often identified him as an expert or resource. As the program sought to engage all coaches as equal partners in the coaching model, it was critical that the project initiator not become a singular coach while others sat and watched. Participants were asked specifically about the dynamic between the project initiator and the group, and perceptions were rich and consistent. One coaching participant voiced an appreciation of having a resource on hand, stating:

I think we appreciated having you there, as I don't know, like the big brother. It was almost like you were the safe person in the room, so if we asked, like we'd ask a question. So we were putting ourselves out there, and we would try, and you could see us

kind of trying to struggle through, that's fine, struggle to kind of come to a conclusion about something with the next question, and then it was funny because then at the end we'd say, "Well was that right?" Or sometimes we'd ask a question and we'd kind of look at you.

Another participant discussed a perceived difference between participation and interference in the intended coaching dynamic:

It was good because you didn't interfere, I wouldn't say, ever. You gauged the room well, and gave us time and space to be able to struggle with questions, so sometimes there were pauses, and long pauses, but that was good because you were basically indicating, "Okay." I always felt like, "The project initiator is giving us time to think. He's waiting for us to say something."

This participant continues with a reinforcement of the initiator's role as a resource person and subject matter expert on hand to help everyone fulfill their roles:

And then we'd come up with something, but then we'd look at you, or at the end be like, "Well was that okay?" At the end, we would kind of talk about, "Why would I ask that?" And you'd be like, "No, that was good. This is how it works."

The critical aspect of the initiator's role emerged not as lead coach, but as coparticipant and resource that allowed people to solicit feedback on their development within the coaching model.

Participant G stated:

We would've maybe said to each other, "Was that okay?" And we wouldn't have been able to affirm. Not that, yeah I do think you're an expert. You were that expert to be able to do that for us, and we could step outside of the situation, then in another way and look at it from another point of view, and that was really beneficial to be able, like I said, to

provide for that affirmation, that guided practice, whereas otherwise I might not be as confident, because I might feel like, “Well was that really coaching? Did we ask the right question or was I just being directive?” So I think that helped.

These perceptions illuminated a critical role within the program; the presence of a guide that allowed for maximum growth through equal participation while at the same time bringing enough expertise to make the learning worthwhile for all participants.

Emerging leaders. In the discussion group, participants noted that roles emerged as the discussions progressed. Often noted was the emergence of informal group leaders who led discussions in a positive and engaging way. Participant B noted:

I did find that particularly one individual, sort of very informally and not through any direction or by any statements, rose as the leader of our group. And by a leader, I mean kept the discussion moving, prodded us for different takes on things. And again, that was all very natural. I didn't take it as a, “Someone's trying to take over the group.” It was just that naturally happened. And so I feel that was really neat to observe that and it did help us to continue to push forward and not to get off on too many tangents into some of the work that we were doing.

Other participants identified a shift in leadership as the topic of discussion changed. One discussion group participant noted:

It was so interesting to see how people who felt very strongly that they could help other people just took the lead. And other people just felt like it was okay to back off. And to let them be the person that would lead that session because they had more experience. So, if it was something that had to do with dealing with the variety of courses in high school for instance. Well, we knew to let people who'd had that experience, it's okay for them to

take the lead and for me to learn from their experiences and things that worked. And no one else felt that they couldn't add even though they weren't the lead at that time or the person that was gaining the most from it.

All participant perceptions surrounding roles in the discussion group expressed a freedom to participate in the manner most comfortable. While this freedom was sometimes accompanied by expressions of hesitation from participants, these were very few in number, and the majority of participants expressed a gratitude for the openness and natural emergence of leadership within the group.

Examples of others. Although coaching participants most often associated development and support with mastery and practice of the coaching model, the discussion group often cited the source of their development as an ability to learn from the examples of others. Participant A described a sense of guidance from the stories that others told and was able to draw examples of different perspectives leading to appropriate options in many different situations. This sentiment was shared by many other discussion group participants who often cited the examples of others as important influences in their daily transactions at their home schools.

Many participants noted the importance of having veteran administrators in the discussion group. This value was often characterized by the organizational knowledge that these members brought to the discussion. Participant C noted:

I think that because we talked a lot about the division and its vision and priorities, it helped me to understand a few things that we do as a division that I maybe didn't understand before. Also hearing from more veteran administrators helped me to see other styles of leadership as I work towards building my own style.

While learning from the examples of others was not unique to the discussion group, the coaching

groups mentioned it rarely, and mostly in situations where they were unfamiliar with the coaching model due to a deficit in the district's coach training or fewer opportunities to practice the model due to attendance or other factors.

Accountability. The last structure that participants offered was unique to the coaching groups. Accountability is part of the coaching model, and was identified by coaching participants as an important part of the structure. When discussing accountability, participants defined it as a follow-up to action steps where group members would ask about the commitments that the coachee made in previous sessions. The participant who engaged in both the coaching and discussion programs made this observation:

Whereas the discussion group there was never any follow up. . . . It was more like talking about things. . . . They [the coaching group] held me accountable. I came back in two weeks and it was like what did you do? How'd that go? What are you going to do next kind of thing?

More than an appreciated element of discussion, participants in the coaching group identified accountability as a key part of the structure, as one member stated, "especially with coaching, you've got to do that follow up piece because it is a process. It's a step, right? There's a plan there and you have to make sure that the plan is being followed through with." Coaching participants noted that this accountability provided authentic feedback and, as part of the coaching model, allows for more direction in professional relationships. Participant I noted:

I think it gives a little more authentic feedback, like when you have those goal settings, and you talk with staff with the coaching model, I think there's more authentic kind of feedback there, than just, "Everything's great."

The accountability and feedback in the coaching program had no parallel structure in the

discussion program. Participants made no mention of following through, providing or seeking accountability, or offering personal feedback. While discussion participants seemed to garner feedback through the discussion of different topics, it seemed to remain the responsibility of individuals to extract the feedback on their practice through comparison of their experiences to those discussed in the group setting or calling other participants outside of program sessions.

The subtheme *Structures that framed growth and support* outlines the roles, communication structures, and expectations that existed in the perceptions of participants. While the coaching and discussion formats differed greatly in these respects, both structures offered common understandings of the parameters of group interactions. These parameters were either formal or informal, but the consistency of participant perceptions demonstrated that they were well understood.

Subtheme 3.2—Ways People Participated in Growth and Support

This subtheme concentrates on how participants interacted with the structures of the coaching and discussion formats. Whereas subtheme 3.1, *Structures That Framed Growth and Support*, raised the perceived expectations, procedures and rules of the program, this one looks more closely at how people engaged within these constructs. This subtheme differs from the theme of *Shared Presence* as it looks at the interactional perceptions of participants as they relate directly to the structures of the program as opposed to the way people showed up in general. There were once again noticeable differences between the perceptions of coaching participants and those of the discussion participants, which are highlighted throughout the subtheme.

Trust the process. Trusting in the process was an important perception among coaching participants. While all but one of the administrators had the same training in the GUIDE coaching model (Ring, 2010), everyone had different perspectives on its

applicability and usefulness, and different levels of comfort and understanding. Many participants expressed a need to work through misgivings or challenges as they developed their coaching skills. Participant L illuminated this when stating, “The first time I did it I wasn’t sure because the situation didn’t necessarily resolve itself at first, but then it did get better.” Coaching group members often characterized this movement from a place of doubt or confusion to one of greater clarity as trusting the process. Describing a tension between solving participant issues and honoring the process, one coaching participant stated:

Just to see the process part of it that you’re not going to be able to put a period at 8:00 and know that everything's going to be wrapped up in a bow and be a happy ending and okay. But just taking strength in the process and taking strength in the whole idea with the intention and the purpose of moving forward and having worked towards the best of whoever’s involved.

This response suggests a trust that the coaching process will move people along, even if immediate session outcomes feel awkward or incomplete. Participant J echoed this perception, noting:

Coaching doesn’t necessarily lead you to the solution right away. The importance is the process I think. . . . But, just looking at it step by step and always moving ahead to something better, I think is what I understand from it.

This trust emerged as the bridge between theoretical understanding and practical application.

As participants began to trust the process, most of the coaching group participants indicated a movement from struggle to ease with the coaching model, epitomizing the movement from theory to practice. One participant mentioned, “I think at the beginning I was more fixated

on the process and making sure that I followed the process and things like that. Then that just became more natural afterwards.” This increased level of comfort with the process followed statements of trust for many coaching participants, and indicated that once the coaching model was understood, some patience was necessary as the participants developed a working familiarity. Many coaching group members noted that this patience necessitated a trust in the power of the model. As many of participants grew more familiar and comfortable with the model, they expressed a desire to use it beyond the coaching group environment. Many looked for opportunities to apply coaching strategies to daily encounters, as exemplified by this participant’s assertion:

It was good practice, and I found myself trying to practice and especially after those [coaching session] days . . . you would spend more time those days or days after going, “Okay, well how can I approach this from a coaching methodology.”

This trust allowed people to move into a place of greater dexterity within the coaching model, where now they could focus their attention on the individual they were coaching rather than the structure they were using.

Moving people forward. Moving people forward was very well represented as a concept with the coaching groups. Participants noted different phases to moving people from where they were to where they wanted to be. The first phase that was often noted was the state of a coachee being stuck. This phase was described by almost every coaching participant, and is represented by participant I’s comment:

The whole idea of moving forward and how sometimes as a leader that when you have people around you who are stuck that one of the best things that you can do for them is to help them move out of that whatever is keeping them stuck and move forward.

Coaching participants expressed an increased sensitivity to people around them who were experiencing difficulty, and identified this state as being stuck. As one participant explained, “Whereas I never really thought about that before but it’s like, okay you’re stuck and I can see how painful this is for you and you don’t really seem to want to get out of it.” Most group members identified the state of being stuck as the starting point for coaching participants who were looking for applications of the model.

Not giving answers. The next phase of development included perceptions of not giving answers, but helping people to move on to a next step by coming to their own realizations. As one participant noted, “We’re trying to guide them to think about it themselves and reflect on it and solve their own problems. Or, how can they approach things from a different point of view? So that was one thing I noticed.” Participants commonly referred to the use of a different perspective as a tool in this phase of the process, as participant D described, it was an effort to:

be that objective person, not to say that I’m the best person to be doing that or I have all these wonderful insights, but I’m going to step outside of this. We’re going to look at it objectively, factually, and then kind of like how can we bring you out of this too. That was with the learning that we did with the coaching model, [and] that was something that really helped me.

Participants often noted that these different perspectives have to be owned by the coachee and that this is not possible if the coach is giving answers. Participant J noted:

The experience is the coaching, you realize that when you’ve gone through that process, you see the situation from a different point of view and you take it to heart better. If somebody just tells you what to do, you might just do it, but you might not get the same learning experience or the same lasting impression maybe, as you would if you’d gone

through that coaching process.

Participant L summarized the importance of not giving answers in the observation that “sometimes it’s not your job to give an answer. Sometimes it’s your job to help, to coach them through a situation so that they can come to their own realizations of something.” The coaching groups were consistent in showing a perception of the value inherent to letting others come to their own conclusions through the use of different perspectives, thus getting unstuck.

Self-reflection. Self-reflection was a popular concept in both the discussion and the coaching groups. This element differs from the aspect of intrinsic growth mentioned in the *Shared Presence* theme as it points more directly to how the participants are using the tools at hand rather than how they position themselves going into the dialogues. One survey respondent from the discussion group noted that the sharing “allowed for more self-reflection as others’ stories and perspectives were shared.” This perception reflects an interaction with the process of the discussion, a taking of the subject matter for internalization and self-questioning. One discussion participant noted that the meetings offered a quality reflective moment, stating “It, to me, was a very good listening and trying to understand and where are you coming from opportunity.” As this element of self-reflection is identified as an opportunity on which others could capitalize on their own, it stands distinct from coaching participants’ perceptions, which noted that self-reflection was part of the prescribed process.

The coaching model offered an explicit opportunity for self-reflection any time a participant assumed the role of coachee. Coaching group members perceived these moments as intense but worthwhile. Participant F offered this description:

I found the coaching sessions were intense. . . Intense to me isn’t a bad word, they were just really focused I guess you could say. There’s a lot of brain being used. . . . It made

me think more. It made me stop and say okay what am I doing here?

Participants identified the intensity of self-reflection as valuable, but this was not the only aspect of self-reflection that emerged from the data. Coaching participants also described real-time meta-cognitive reflections on their use of the coaching model. One participant stated:

Initially I think I always felt like I was trying to generate questions. Before I had the experience of a few sessions, wondering what to say. Thinking about, “Oh I would really like to ask this question but is this really a coaching question or is it not a coaching question” kind of thing.

This thinking reflected not only a level of reflection based in problem solving and personal experience, but a level of reflection based in an awareness of the process and how the individual was engaging in it. The discussion group expressed a similar perception of awareness of their participation in the discussion process. However, these perceptions were mostly limited to how much the individual was participating or the topic of discussion. As participant A noted, “You’d often go in with a little bit of that anxiety piece again, as to ‘okay, am I going to share and how might this go?’” Discussion group participants offered no reflections on whether a potential contribution was appropriate for a discussion format per se. Any hesitations expressed by discussion group participants revolved around concern over the opinions of others rather than the masterful use of a discussion format to solve problems.

Living the learning encompasses the ways people interact with the perceived structures of the groups in which they were involved. The perceptions in this theme illuminated the understandings of how the two formats worked and how participants saw themselves engaging in these structures. Group members from both formats and from every group identified processes within the program that enabled them to get involved in self and group development and support.

Theme Four: The Value of Partnership

The fourth and final theme examines the effects of the program as perceived by participants. These effects included perceptions of personal and organizational outcomes from the pilot program, incorporating aspects such as understandings of leadership styles, frameworks for leadership and communication, and social and emotional outcomes such as improved networks and personal feelings. The perceptions contained within *The Value of Partnership* respond to the purpose of the study, which was to discover administrators' perceptions of the dialogic coaching program and how they perceived that development and support impacting their leadership and communication at the school level. These perceptions of value centered mainly on effects of the program and elucidated potential gains for school-based administrators in their professional practice. This theme also outlines frameworks that emerged from the program through the eyes of participants.

The Value of Partnership identifies participants' perceptions of value, which can be categorized as either personal or organizational in nature. The first subtheme, *The Value for Individual Leaders*, includes the observations that participants offered that affected them on a personal level. The second subtheme, *The Value for Leaders and the System*, expands on perceptions of the program and their effects on both the individual and organizational understandings of leadership and communication.

Transition Categories

Before going directly into subtheme A, it is important to note two frameworks that emerged from participant perceptions that incorporated elements of both *Living the Learning* and *The Value of Partnership*. This transition category between themes contains leadership and communication frameworks that the researcher has named *Directive vs. Partnership* and

Confrontational vs. Partnership. Frameworks can be described as frames of reference, which are “a set of ideas, conditions, or assumptions that determine how something will be approached, perceived, or understood” (Meriam-Webster online, 2018). These two frameworks discuss not only how people participate in the coaching or discussion groups but also the emergent mindset that is very often voiced as an effect of the program. In this way the frameworks bridge the two themes and incorporate elements of each.

Directive vs. partnership. Every interview participant and most survey responses perceived *Directive vs. Partnership* as a framework for leadership and communication. The concept of directive behavior or communication emerged directly from the data, and was commonly used as a dichotomous alternative to a coaching, mentorship, or partnership approach. Part of the district coach training included a distinction between a coach approach and a direct approach to leadership. As all but one of the administrators in the program had undergone this training, the conceptualization of a direct approach or directive relationship was a commonly communicated perception. *Directive vs partnership* was illustrated by one participant in their response to a question that asked for their main perceived benefit from the program:

[The main benefit is] Not to be as directive. . . . It’s brought more of that mentorship kind of piece to the leadership rather than the directive piece. It’s hard sometimes when there’s an issue not to just be directive, and say, “Well this is what you need to do next.”

Participants who referenced this framework often alluded to a hierarchy between leader and follower. Participants noted a difference between telling people what to do and entering into a partnership to determine actions together. One discussion group participant offered this reflection:

If I’m going to help a team of teachers transition to outcomes-based reporting, I think that

it's really important that if we do, for example, a workshop on rubrics, on how to design rubrics so that we can rubricize assignments. It's important that I'm there learning with them and not just saying, "Read these pages and I'll be checking on your rubrics next week." . . . We could work together instead of me just dictating and then them going off and doing what they think is right anyways.

This framework emerged from both coaching and discussion formats, and serves as a frame of reference that has the potential to help people move from a hierarchical conceptualization of leadership to a partnership-based understanding of leadership. Partnership lies at the heart of the framework as an aspect of leadership that is independent but fully implementable with either group format. The perceptions offered by participants in all groups indicated a shifting of perspective from hierarchical relationship to partner relationship.

Confrontation vs. partnership. This framework differed in that perceptions outlined a direct confrontation as opposed to a hierarchical relationship between two people as a starting point. This framework was often characterized in the data as facing forward together side by side (partnership) looking at the same goal as opposed to facing toward each other (confrontation) with an intention of being right or winning an argument. One participant described a lived experience in which this was a concern:

The last situation I brought, I knew that, as we had said before, like we were both like this [indicates two fists colliding in confrontation], head-to-head, and we had to figure out a way to get here [indicates fists working side by side] but I wasn't, yeah. Sometimes you're still stuck in certain things that prevent you from getting to the facing forward situation with both people facing forward instead of head-to-head.

Although participants in the discussion group did reference this framework from time to time,

coaching group members offered the bulk of the descriptions of this framework. These perceptions often followed a description of coaching strategies and indicated a possibility for the relief of tension and movement forward together. Participant G connected this feeling to the framework, and stated:

A lot of the conflicts we talked about or the problems that we brought forth had to deal with two different sides, kind of going head-to-head at a problem, and so trying to figure out when there was those two conflicts, how we could move the situation forward by figuring out a common purpose or a common ground that allowed both sides to feel like they were moving forward and getting to a better place... where you're taking the conflict or some of the road blocks out of the way, so that you can both head in the same direction, I shouldn't say right direction, in the same direction with that common purpose so that you don't have that back and forth conflict.

Participants described these frameworks as newly developed realizations of how they participated in a leadership dynamic. As one participant stated when asked what they perceived as the biggest benefit of the program, "Cues to remind myself. Like for example, our group talked a lot about working side by side instead of head on, and I think that is something that blew my mind." The group members stated that these frameworks changed how they perceived and approached leadership, and that the application of these frameworks would become a clearer focus in their practice.

Subtheme 4.1 – The Value for Individual Leaders

This subtheme focused on the value that participants perceived on a personal level. These are elements of value that were personal in nature and required no exchanges to elucidate. While participants may have discussed some of these effects with other participants, the responses that

they gave to interview and survey questions focused mainly on their own perceptions.

Positive experience. The first and most commonly expressed value that participants took from the program was that it was a positive experience. Every interview respondent and all survey responders but one expressly mentioned this positive perception. These were most often general statements such as “I found it to be a very positive experience for me personally,” or “It was very positive. I really looked forward to meeting with that group of people.” However, some participants detailed a deeper satisfaction. Participant H noted:

I always left feeling really good about where I was and how I thought about things and helping someone, or listening to someone, or getting through that situation made me feel good. I thought that the coaching group was a really positive experience.

One surprising result was that the participant who expressed concerns about building trust in the lesser-attended group noted “It was a good experience for the collegiality part of it. That was very, very enjoyable.”

Another result of note was that the expressions of positive feelings were often tied to perceived value, as exemplified by participant C’s statement:

I always felt very excited for the next one. I always felt like that was great; time that was very well spent. . . . It’s awesome. It’s humbling because it’s like, wow, I get to be a part of this and I get to learn from this. It just inspired me that much more I guess.

Once again, the greatest evidence that the experience was well received by participants may lie in the fact that most expressed a willingness to continue and have participated as volunteers beyond the pilot effort.

Solidifying vs. changing leadership conceptualization. Another benefit that individual participants expressed was an opportunity to refine their conceptualizations of leadership and

communication. When asked how the program affected their understandings of leadership and communication, many participants indicated that their understandings hadn't changed so much as they had become clearer. One coaching participant stated:

I don't know if it has changed my vision of how I want to lead, but I think that I have some more concrete ideas to explain it, like to conceptualize it in my head and to work through it. It has definitely helped me to grow into the role I want to.

Survey respondents who participated in the discussion format offered similar reflections, with one stating, "The program hasn't really impacted my understanding of leadership other than to make me more keenly aware of the need for reflection and connection as leaders. The time spend [sic] sharing with others has been really valuable for that." Participants who expressed perceptions of value and satisfaction also offered suggestions for program improvement. These suggestions ranged from alternate times and frequencies of meetings to different ways to create groups. Some group members expressed an interest in trying a different format as the program progressed and others voiced an interest in inviting new participants into the next round to create increasingly well-rounded communities of development and support.

Subtheme 4.2—The Value for Leaders and the System

This subtheme explored perceptions that participants noted have the potential to increase shared understandings or improve organizational structures. It includes references to leadership styles, with a specific focus on a lead learner perspective, and also mentions networking and the institutionalization of some of the benefits of the program.

Networking. Participants frequently cited networking as a perceived benefit of the program. This element was mentioned more frequently by discussion group participants than by coaching group participants, but was referred to at least once by almost all members of the

program. Coaching participants referred to the aspect of networking much more indirectly than did the discussion group participants. This was exemplified by one coaching participant who stated, “So yeah, so very hopeful, collegial. Collegial for sure, that I would feel more comfortable maybe, phoning somebody to say hey, what do you think of this?” Discussion group members, by contrast, often cited the element of networking directly, as one participant stated:

I think it builds a better professional network between administrators, if they did have problems they’d feel more comfortable talking to people. “How would you go about this?” I think there's a huge networking piece, so I felt good after.

Survey respondents offered additional detail at times, with one stating:

This discussion group allowed me to form relationships with people who did not come into admin at the same time with me. For me, that is the real value of the program . . . an opportunity for people to expand their admin support network with a variety of individuals at various stages of their admin journeys.

Overall, the creation and fortification of professional networks emerged as a powerful benefit for individuals involved in the program, and offered professionals from across the district an opportunity to share thoughts on leadership and communication.

Leadership style. Many participants discussed leadership style, with some offering references to servant leadership. As people discussed their perceptions of servant leadership, it was often framed within the learning of the program, as demonstrated by Participant H:

I see myself as a servant leader, so but I think, again, as I said before, it’s not trying to be that directive problem solving all the time, restorative servant leader . . . knowing that you’re serving the person better by helping them to come to their own realization than by me just telling them.

While more than a third of the participants referenced servant leadership, none of them went on to describe their understanding of what servant leadership was, but often associated the concept with the constructs of the program.

Another perception that moved the discussion of leadership style from the individual to the organizational level was the perceived value of sharing leadership styles and honing them as a group. One participant explained:

I think the only models of leadership that I had going into this were just the experiences I had working with different administrators. It's like okay well I know that I would definitely like to do this like this person did but I definitely wouldn't want to do this like this person did kind of thing. For me, it was just that's what I went into it with. That was kind of the extent of the reflection I had done on the kind of leader that I wanted to be.

A survey respondent moved this perception forward, stating "Our discussion group sessions reinforced common leadership ideas and allowed for the sharing of good resources that could be utilized to further leadership strategies." Leadership style, through the power of networking, became an effect of group conversations that allowed for a greater common understanding of leadership and communication among all participants.

Lead learner. The concept of lead learner leadership was included as a part of the semi-structured interview questions, as this perspective was offered at the beginning of the program in the form of a book for all participants to use as a baseline resource throughout the pilot initiative. Most participants expressed an understanding of this leadership perspective but admitted that they had not intentionally integrated the resource into program activities. Participant D stated:

I remember sort of reading it, and really I think if what I remember correctly is that the lead learner is a learner, as easy as that sounds. And the lead learner is with their

subordinates-slash-teachers, learning with them. And the old cliché of there's not really one expert in the room. There's a facilitator who works with all the other experts in the room, too, to move their vision and mission forward. So that's kind of how I understand Fullan's Lead Learner concept.

While participants were hesitant to identify a lead learner perspective as a guiding force for the program, many offered reflection on how the program encouraged or reinforced the lead learner perspective. One discussion group member noted:

I think that what I saw was that when we shared our experiences and through our discussion groups, the successes that were shared by the other administrators in the group often happened when they were in that lead learner role and when they were working alongside their teachers, not dictating to their teachers.

The lead learner perspective was seldom noted as an intentional part of the program. Participants expressed challenges in reading the supplied book as they were very busy preparing for the school year. However, all participants in the program (and throughout the district, as senior administration decided to buy a copy for everyone) now have a common resource for the definition and language surrounding effective school-based leadership.

Institutionalization. The final perception of organizational value was the perception that this type of work should be institutionalized. Participants who found the program valuable expressed a desire to make senior administration aware of the program in the hope that time and resources could be allocated to its development. One participant stated:

Because it is important to our development and growth and our job, making a bit more of a priority or a bit more of this we see value in, therefore, you will be given this time to do it. I guess maybe seeing some kind of growth or development within the division as being

provided, not just voluntary kind of here's my time because I know that I will benefit from it. I guess just seeing the value recognized maybe.

The perception of value created a unified voice that could communicate to senior administration a desire for support and development. While school-based leaders in School District X have historically valued support and development, participants in the program now had a language and format to advance as they stated a case for better development and support that could be resourced by the district.

While all other participants in the program expressed perceptions of great value in the work, one survey respondent was clear that the program held no value for them as an individual, as they had no positive feedback within their survey responses outside of "positive facilitation." This participant, who indicated in the survey that they participated in fewer than three coaching sessions, voiced a number of concerns, including perceived lack of trust, perceived weaknesses in the coaching program, and uncertainty that the program could continue without senior administrative support. The participant did not express negative emotions but was specific in their feedback. In commenting on the coaching group in particular, the participant noted:

I left 2 sessions without experiencing any personal professional development. In retrospect, I would have joined the discussion group for the reason being that the coaching group requires an innate sense of trust. The coaching group approach may be best suited to small groups where partners are able to choose one another.

This feedback pointed out some of the challenges that group coaching programs can face, and the participant offered suggestions to improve upon the perceived shortfalls noted in the first response. These suggestions included having leaders reach out to form their own coaching relationships and the creation of a mentorship program. While the participant noted that the

facilitation of the program “was very positive,” they also noted that there were no personal gains and offered as one possible reason, “There appears to be resistance toward sharing and growing with colleagues. Can’t quite put a finger on it . . . is it the competitive nature among the group? Are people in fear of being judged?” The feedback from this participant was a useful tool for further analysis of the dataset.

Feedback of this nature is valuable as a lens for the examination of other respondents’ perceptions. This survey respondent’s offerings served as the foundation for much of the disproving memo work. In an examination of the contrast that this participant provides, the researcher, through disproving memo writing, looked for evidence from other participants supporting a less valuable perception of the program. This process allowed the researcher to bring greater scrutiny to the observations made by other participants, such as the slow creation of trust identified by one participant and dissatisfaction with group construction voiced by another. Ultimately, the researcher found in those two instances statements that counterbalanced the perceived drawbacks, with one participant noting that trust did develop, just to a lesser degree and the other participant noting that in retrospect they were very happy with their group.

Summary

Without a common language and understanding, school-based leadership is often inconsistent, and has the potential to negatively affect student learning (Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). This study sought to address the problem of potential learning issues for School District X (SDX) through a formative program evaluation of the pilot peer coaching and discussion initiative implemented in September of 2017. This chapter provided an overview of the method of analysis, with examples of how coding, theming, and analytic memo creation took place. The chapter then went on to describe the four main themes and eight subthemes that arose from the

data. These themes described the preconditions, presence, process, and effects that participants perceived as emerging from the pilot program.

The themes directly responded to the purpose of the study, which was to determine the perceived effects of a pilot dialogic peer coaching program as they relate to leadership and communication development. It accomplished this not only by raising the themes perceived by coaching participants, but also by comparing and contrasting these observations with those offered by participants in a discussion group. Theme one, *Setting the Stage*, outlined elements participants viewed as important at the outset of the program as they related to logistics and mindset. Theme two, *Shared Presence*, raised participant perceptions of their own state of mind as well as the contributions they and others can offer toward group success through the way they approach development and support. Theme three, *Living the Learning*, raised and described participant perceptions of the structure of the program as well as how they and others participated within those structures. Theme four, *The value of partnership*, described participants' perceptions of the value that the program offered at both the individual and organizational level. These themes offer rich formative feedback on a pilot program that seeks to create a common understanding of leadership and communication through shared language and structures.

Chapter five will interpret these findings, answering all research questions directly and referring to the outcomes outlined in chapter four. It will outline how the results may be of use to individuals within SDX and to all stakeholders associated with the organization by tying the results closely to the larger body of literature, knowledge, and practice in the fields of educational leadership and coaching. It will present recommendations for action and further study and finish with an articulation of the significance of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the perceptions of school-based administrators (SBAs) involved in a peer dialogic group coaching program. The pilot initiative in School District X (SDX) offered principals and vice-principals an opportunity to discuss and develop their leadership and communication skills as they relate to a K–12 school environment. The program was developed in response to the increasing challenges that SBAs experience in K–12 schools (Aas, 2017; Bush, 2009; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood, et al., 2010), and represented a desire on the part of SDX to construct a program for leadership and communication development and support (Superintendent of HR, personal communication, September 14, 2017). School leaders who do not have a robust system for support and development run the risk of well-intentioned but counterproductive leadership behaviors that can have a negative effect on student learning (Bogler, 2001; DeWitt, 2017; Fullan, 2014; Robertson, 2016; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). As such, SDX looked to coaching as a potential support as coaching has proved effective for leadership development and support within the field of education both in practical application and scholarly research (Aguilar, 2017; Flückiger et al., 2017; Lindle et al., 2017). More specifically, peer dialogic group coaching is an emerging tool that shows promise for leadership support and development while also providing an opportunity for group co-construction of a common language for and understanding of leadership within an organization (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Flückiger et al., 2017; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012; Nicolaidou et al., 2017)

The pilot initially started strictly as a coaching program, but participants identified a wish to engage in a discussion group early on. The result was three groups—one discussion group,

and two peer dialogic coaching groups—comprising a total of 14 participants who volunteered from a group of 56 administrators within the district. The coaching groups met every two weeks for a total of six sessions between September and December 2017. The discussion group met approximately every two weeks for a total of five sessions within the same timeframe. The program concluded with eight exit interviews (four from the coaching groups, three from the discussion group and one from a participant that attended both groups) and an anonymous online survey that garnered nine responses.

This study employed a qualitative approach to formative program evaluation and found that coaching group participants identified important elements of the program that affected their understandings of leadership and communication. These elements fell into the following themes:

- Perceptions of preconditions needed for program success (Setting the Stage),
- Articulations of how participants must be aware of self and group presence within the program for maximum trust and growth (Shared Presence),
- Descriptions of the perceived structures of the program and how participants needed to interact within these structures for support and development (Living the Learning),
- Expressions of the perceived value of the program through the effects identified by participants (The Value of Partnership).

The perceptions contained within these themes indicated that peer dialogic coaching is a web of interconnected and interdependent elements that are equally important to the whole. An interesting finding of this study was the emergence of this interconnected web where every element identified by participants was connected to and dependent upon all others. Further, the participants suggested that a failure to consider any individual element could lead to a loss of effectiveness across the program. This emerging model of practice reflects many of the main

contentions of the academic literature on coaching and leadership development, including a deep consideration of many different aspects of coaching and a collaborative, system-based approach to leadership (Bloom et al., 2005; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; DeWitt, 2017; Knight, 2011; Fullan, 2007; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Before interpreting these and other findings, however, it must be noted that a formative program evaluation applied to a small pilot effort within a bounded system is not generalizable, transferable, or replicable due to the size and context of the group being studied. The emerging model of practice suggested by participants offers only opportunities for practitioners or scholars to reflect on the application of peer dialogic group coaching in a K–12 school leadership environment. While this model of practice was not identified by discussion group participants, the perceptions of those involved in the discussion effort are sewn throughout the findings. Additionally, participants expressed concerns regarding anonymity, even if consistently identified by a pseudonym such as ‘participant A’, and as such are often identified simply as ‘participants’ within the study. All interview and survey respondents are represented chapter five.

At times the perceptions of discussion group members were similar to those of the coaching groups, especially regarding perceived realities such as a lack of time or a shared interpretation of directive relationships. Many perceptions were also very different or nonexistent for discussion group members, such as very different structures perceived among the different groups or a lack of any mention of accountability in the discussion group. One participant who engaged in both groups stated “I had a more holistic experience in the coaching group of professional and personal and I felt like there was more growth on my part. The discussion group was awesome and I liked it, but that was more networking.” When perceptions from the two formats were compared, valuable insights emerged that suggested that both formats contained

value, but that the coaching model focused more on growth, action steps, and partnership through deep listening and accountability.

Interpretation of Findings

This formative program evaluation was guided and informed by three research questions. As the program under examination was a pilot initiative, the purpose of the study was to discover administrators' perceptions of the dialogic coaching program and how they perceive that support impacting their leadership and communication at the school level. The exploration of participant perceptions is a valuable first step in the identification of patterns of program effectiveness, and as a formative program evaluation seeks to provide recommendations for improvement, these perceptions offer valuable insights (Patton, 2015). A formative program evaluation does not determine the degree to which a program achieved outcomes, but rather seeks to offer feedback for improvement, as Patton (2015) noted:

In program evaluation, for example, explanations about which things appear to lead to other things, which aspects of a program produce certain effects, and how processes lead to outcomes are natural areas for analysis. When careful study of the data gives rise to ideas about causal linkages, there is no reason to deny those interested in the study's results the benefit of those insights, with presentation of the supporting evidence from interviews, case studies, and field observations. (p. 582)

As such, one main question and two sub-questions provided direction to the research in support of the purpose of the study:

RQ₁: How do K–12 principals and vice-principals perceive the impact of dialogic peer coaching on their communication and leadership skills?

Sub-questions included:

RQ₂: What is the perceived impact of the group coaching experience on the participants' application of coaching strategies in the school environment?

RQ₃: What are the different perceptions that emerge from dialogic peer coaching groups compared to a peer discussion group?

Question One

The main question of this study was: How do K–12 principals and vice-principals perceive the impact of dialogic peer coaching on their communication and leadership skills? Participants in the peer dialogic group coaching pilot program stated that the experience was valuable, and that the value they received from the program was connected to many different conditions that were each critical to the development of their understanding of leadership and communication. All survey respondents and interview participants provided deep reflection on the program, describing an interconnected and interdependent web of elements. All elements are contained within the themes (appendices E–H) and include aspects of the program that range from attendance to frameworks for leadership. These elements created an opportunity for the development and support of their understandings of leadership and communication in schools. Participants noted that each element was critical to program success, with no one element emerging as more important than others, but each depending on one another to sustain a working system. The entire set of elements comprises approximately 70 different factors for consideration, depending slightly on how a user would interpret participant perceptions. For a graphic representation of selected elements, see appendix I. As a partial example of how these elements interact with and depend upon each other, here is how just a few of the elements work together, as drawn from the collection of participant perceptions:

- Finding time for development is critical as it allows participants space away from day-to-day school duties to enter into a mindset of growth.
- The mindset of growth is difficult to engage in without sufficient time but it is also necessary to create a common understanding of the presence required for development.
- Presence is dependent on a common understanding of growth intention but is perceived as less effective for development if there exists no common understanding of the coaching model.
- The coaching model is not effective without the necessary participatory behaviors that help group members leverage the model.
- Effective participation in the coaching model leads to deeper understanding of personal frameworks for leadership and communication and stronger ties with other administrators.
- These ties with other administrators require time for further development to have maximum impact on leadership and communication skills.

This cyclic set of interdependent elements describes only a few of the factors that are necessary for a high-quality coaching experience in the eyes of participants. The example, however, provides a glimpse of how each individual condition, considered independently and intentionally, allows a coach or program architect the opportunity to create more meaningful development.

Participants were able to tease apart essential elements of the dynamic and complex nature of group dialogic peer coaching to identify what they viewed were the necessary conditions for progress and mutual understanding. The group members often noted that the ignorance or misunderstanding of any one element could lead to diminished opportunities for

leadership and communication development. If all elements are intentionally considered and expressly addressed, the interconnected web of elements can work as a whole to support leadership development. Peer dialogic group coaching is an effective framework for the development of a deep common understanding and language for leadership and communication among school based administrators. Many factors within the coaching program support this growth, and each factor is essential and worthy of individual attention.

Question Two

The second research question, which was a sub-question to the main inquiry, asked: What is the perceived impact of the peer group dialogic coaching experience on the participants' application of coaching strategies in the school environment? Participants described many instances where they used coaching strategies in the school environment, describing moments when they applied a coach approach to interactions with students, teachers, parents, and even their administrative partners at varying moments throughout the program. What these descriptions revealed, however, is that coaching is more than a tool for communication and development; it is a mindset that participants apply not only in coaching conversations but in their conceptualization of leadership across multiple dimensions. Group members described a different type of thinking that they applied to leadership situations and to communication.

A different type of thinking emerged from the coaching group participant perceptions. Observations from different participants expressing a mindset of "meeting them where they're at," "way more listening," "curious about the coachee's experience," and "moving people forward" indicated a shift toward the partnership or coach perspective. As the program progressed, group members noted that they had developed deeper understandings of how they were approaching situations in their school environment. At first, they described this cognitive

process as applying a coaching model, but as their efficacy within the model developed, they described their conceptualization of leadership as a coach approach or partnership approach. Some participants also noted that they moved from intentionally seeking moments to apply the coaching model to a partnership mindset where their curiosity about the reality of others created opportunities to not only apply coaching strategies but to create more meaningful relationships. They expressed a desire to partner with people “where they were at” in order to help them move forward. As one participant noted:

I find myself more naturally asking questions and listening instead of talking. I thought I used to listen, but I didn't. Coaching does come much easier for me. I know what kinds of questions to ask.

Now I understand that there are different ways to work through it, and the model is good, but if it naturally moves then move it. So that is very helpful to me, because I was intimidated. I didn't really know how to start a coaching conversation, because I was under the impression that you have to be like oh would you like to come into my office for a coaching session? Now it makes way more sense and it's way more natural for me. Based on these perceptions, it is reasonable to conclude that peer dialogic group coaching not only provides greater capacity to use coaching strategies specifically, it offers an opportunity to develop a greater meta-cognitive awareness of who participants are as leaders. Participant J stated, “I found myself trying to practice . . . going, Okay, well how can I approach this from a coaching methodology?” This statement exemplifies how participants in the peer group dialogic coaching program used coaching strategies more often and perceived them as effective in the school environment. It also typifies how most changed their perceptions of leadership to include a more intentional partnership mentality as a school leader.

Question Three

Question three asked: *What are the different perceptions that emerge from dialogic peer coaching groups compared to a peer discussion group?* There were many similarities between the two groups, such as the need to create time for development, the importance of intention when participating with the group, and the great value that participants received out of their experience. Although these observations were similar in tone, the differences between the peer dialogic coaching groups and the discussion group emerged as participants became more specific in their descriptions.

Two main differences emerged between the coaching and discussion groups. The first was that coaching focused very specifically on the individual being coached, while discussion focused more specifically on the topic being discussed. Members of the coaching groups noted that the participants focused primarily and almost exclusively on the experiences or challenges that the coachee brought to the session. While coaches sometimes offered an example as a means to frame a situation differently, the coachee was the center of attention at all times. The discussion group settled on a particular topic at the outset of each meeting. Participants in this group discussed in turn how this particular phenomenon played out in each of their contexts and affected them personally, with few questions being asked of others about future action plans or self-reflection.

Participants in both groups identified an opportunity to expand their understanding of leadership and communication, but whereas the discussion group spoke of real-time situations in a more general sense, the coaching groups worked with very specific and personal instances of leadership and communication. Members of the coaching group expressed a desire to understand the person being coached and the personal context surrounding them. One participant described

it as a realization that “the solution for one person isn’t going to be the right solution for another person depending where they’re at.” The discussion group members, as a point of comparison, identified a desire to understand the topic and the big-picture implications for leadership and communication. One survey respondent identified the discussion group sharing as “sessions [that] reinforced common leadership ideas and allowed for the sharing of good resources that could be utilized to further leadership strategies.” Sharing of this nature was perceived as valuable but distinct from the coaching experience.

The second difference was the format of group interactions. The coaching group identified the importance of a clearly understood coaching model with distinct roles, while the discussion group identified an emergent format for discussion that was open, participant-driven, and described as laid back. Within the coaching groups, it was clear that one member was the coachee and that the other members were co-coaches. Leadership for the interactions was shared among the co-coaches and was guided by the coaching model. While a coaching expert was present in the form of the program initiator, his role was distinct as it was a resource role and not a lead coaching role. In the discussion group, one leader naturally emerged. This leader was universally respected and the leadership that this person offered was widely appreciated. There was no formal definition of roles, and the informal leadership of the emergent leader was an observation only; no one expressed a desire to designate or to officially acknowledge leadership within the group sessions.

Both groups described perceptions of development and growth, but the coaching group offered deeper insight into a construct for development that participants could apply in their home schools, whereas the discussion group offered a space for reflection and sharing. Both formats were valued, but they were distinct in their purpose and effect. The discussion group

elicited value statements indicating the worth of hearing others' points of view and the value of networking. The coaching groups identified growth and active examination of their leadership as the primary benefits. One participant, who took part in both the coaching and discussion groups, was asked which format they would continue with if they had to choose only one. The response was:

Coaching. I would choose coaching, because I felt like I had a more holistic experience in the coaching group and I felt like there was more professional and personal growth on my part. The discussion group was awesome and I liked it, but that was more networking.

And I'm okay with that.

The different formats for group interaction were perceived as needing different levels of trust. As coaching required everyone to take a turn as the coachee, participants noted that trust was a major factor in their ability to benefit from the format. Individuals in the discussion group, however, noted that they had the opportunity to sit back if needed and if they felt uneasy they would have the opportunity to simply observe. Both formats offered meaningful professional interactions, but the nature and requirements of the two formats were very different.

Group outcomes. The two formats created very different outcomes. Many participants within the discussion group noted that they had gained more knowledge and a greater perspective of different topics after hearing others' experiences and opinions. Some identified personal growth and clearer leadership conceptualizations, but these perceptions emerged through reflection that they engaged in on their own. These discussion participants needed to extract a personal contextualization of leadership from the discussions. Participants in the coaching group made frequent references to action plans, accountability and group reflection that helped them delve more deeply into their identities as leaders. Most identified coaching partnerships that

forced them to examine their assumptions and biases as others asked meaningful questions.

Both discussion and coaching formats provided meaningful but different professional growth. Discussion focused on shared knowledge and network creation while coaching focused on individual development, examination of assumptions and biases, transfer to professional practice, and accountability for the application of the strategies in the leadership arena. Coaching showed a greater potential to lead to the application of leadership strategies in schools and the analysis of that application than did discussion.

Implications

A formative program evaluation refers specifically to the setting and conditions within which it was conducted, and as such cannot generalize findings to a wider audience. However, this study can offer opportunities for reflection and consideration in the creation or improvement of a professional development program, as many of the emergent elements and themes reflect findings embedded in the larger body of educational leadership and coaching literature. Through the factors identified by participants as being essential to growth, this study offers practitioners and researchers the opportunity to look at development programs through general themes or specific elements as they move through a comprehensive model for the support of school leaders. The implications of these elements follow, and are presented within the themes that arose in the study, with connections to the supportive literature illustrating key considerations for program developers.

Setting the Stage

The different essential elements which emerged from the pilot program are categorized into four major themes. The first is that preconditions matter. In the theme *Setting the Stage*, many individuals remarked that the logistics impacted the ability of participants to engage in the

program. They also offered different opinions on how this impacted the learning and the degree to which their leadership skills were affected. These preconditions are divided between logistics and mindset and reflect many of the elements identified by the coaching literature in education as essential to an impactful coaching experience.

Creating the environment. The first set of preconditions contained within *Setting the Stage* include the logistics that participants identified as essential to an effective coaching experience. Within the coaching literature weekly or biweekly sessions lasting approximately an hour were identified as effective parameters for the establishment and maintenance of developmental momentum (Brown & Tobias, 2013; Cerni et al., 2010; Close, 2013; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Although the participants in this study identified time as a major obstacle to professional development, most agreed that two weeks represented the longest amount of time they would want to wait between sessions and that one hour sessions seemed most appropriate for effective coaching interactions. The participants noted that the value of these regular meetings was such that they would advocate for an allocation of time within the working day.

Understanding the conditions. A second precondition that is essential to leadership development is that it must be grounded in daily professional practice. Knight (2011) stated that teaching professionals “should apply their learning to their real-life practice as they are learning” (p. 42). In discussing relevance, participants highly valued discussions that centered on current dilemmas. This focus on practice created coaching partnerships that targeted the structures and leadership skills that could move them through real-time experiences toward greater student learning. The value of coaching partnerships based in praxis is directly referenced in the coaching and leadership literature and is often cited as an essential element for school success (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Aguilar, 2017; Brown & Tobias, 2013; Carraway & Young, 2014; Knight,

2007; Mangin, 2014; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). An examination of lived practice, as described by the coachee and addressed in partnership with the coaches, allowed participants the ability to make important gains in the understanding of challenges and the ability to move more quickly and effectively toward a greater level of professional function.

Moving preconditions into the conceptualization of leadership. The preconditions raised by participants affected not only the coaching experience but also their conceptualization of leadership. As leaders, participants expressed a renewed commitment to creating the necessary preconditions for effective professional relationships in their home schools. Many discussed how they would set aside more time for discussions with teachers and that these interactions need to be intentionally focused on the business of teaching and learning. They stated that this time is best used in small or one-on-one groupings and that this type of consideration, though sometimes challenging, is essential for them to grow as leaders. These perceptions fall directly in line with Fullan (2007) and Robinson (2011), who stated that relationships lie at the heart of great educational leadership and that effective school leaders create time to understand and connect with those who follow. As Fullan (2007) stated, “If you don’t treat others (for example, teachers) well and fairly, you will be a leader without followers” (p. 13). This theme implies that care and attention must be brought not only to the participants involved in the coaching but also to the initial structures within a peer dialogic group coaching program in order to account for the complex context of educational leadership.

Shared Presence

The second theme outlines the personal and group approaches to the coaching relationship that participants identified as critical for meaningful development. Group members were clear that the intentions held by participants and groups impacted the establishment of trust

and safety. Chief among these intentions was a desire to engage in development and growth. Participants noted the importance of the voluntary nature of the program, allowing those who chose to participate to do so out of an intrinsic desire to engage in professional development.

Purposeful intention. The greater body of educational coaching literature describes the element of choice as a phenomenon that encompasses not only an adult learner's choice to participate in the coaching, but also the choice of topic by the coachee within the coaching conversations (Carraway & Young, 2014; Knight, 2007; Murray, Xa, & Mazur, 2009; Rhodes, 2013). Effective partnerships focus on the needs of the coachee and self-efficacy is most developed when the coachee can choose the topic of greatest importance (Murray, Xa, & Mazur, 2009; Rhodes, 2013). A coachee's ability to choose the direction of the conversation is pivotal to the coaching model, as the International Coach Federation (2017) described the coaching partnership as honoring the desire of the client. This honoring of a coachee's intention was raised as an important element by participants in the study and implies that a coaching program must hold this concept at the heart of the model.

The desire to engage in development also relates well to the supportive theories that underpin coaching models. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory stated that learners are influenced through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion. When participants came together with a common intention of growth, they noted a sameness of purpose that opened up opportunities for more trust and open discussion. This sameness of purpose represents positive social persuasion (Bandura, 1986) as group members felt inspired to participate more actively as they saw the intention of growth in others. Participants noted that although they often held reservations and insecurities moving into the program, their desire to grow outweighed these reservations and brought them to a place where they were willing to

commit to personal and group learning. Simply stated, they participated because they wanted to be there, had the opportunity to set the direction, and were ready to set aside reservations. As such, each participant offered a common intention on which groups could build safety and trust.

Contributing to the group. When asked how groups were able to build trust and safety, the majority of participants described a lack of judgment and a commitment to understanding and supporting other members of the group. They also discussed a shared commitment to seeking the value in all of the statements of others. This description of presence reflects the contention in the literature that the way in which people show up for the conversation is an essential consideration (Knight, 2007; Knight, 2011; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Dialogue and reflection within a coaching relationship must be built on reciprocal respect and curiosity (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005; Carraway & Young, 2015; Loving, 2011; Knight, 2007; Kostin & Haeger, 2006). Participants noted that trust and safety were achieved when group members demonstrated curiosity surrounding the coachee's perspective without judgment of the coachee's responses.

According to participants, the conscious efforts of group members to take stock of their presence within the coaching groups and their ability to share a common understanding of how they are present to others is essential for the construction of trusting relationships leading to growth. Van Nieuwerburgh (2012) suggested that dyadic coaching relationships are superior to group coaching constructs for the creation of trust and growth. This study contends that deep levels of trust and growth are possible within group coaching constructs, but that all elements of the coaching program must be considered in order to produce similar levels of perceived trust compared to coaching dyads.

Transferring shared presence to leadership. The idea of presence goes beyond coaching and into the domain of leadership in general both through participant perceptions and

the literature on educational leadership. Fullan (2014) discussed a moral imperative, which he described as a “deep belief that leaders must lead the organization in ‘raising the bar and closing the gap’ of learning for all students, regardless of background” (p. 124). This imperative also requires an ability to build relational trust as it is an essential leadership capability for effective principals and vice-principals (Robinson, 2011). The shared presence of individuals and groups, as noted by participants, reinforced the contention that the coaching process allows people a common starting point, focused on higher learning outcomes and a shared willingness to move past misgivings in order to achieve them. Participants noted that they not only got the chance to practice engagement in this type of shared presence, but they had the opportunity to refine their understanding of it. The examination of individual and group presence within a coaching construct offers a window into the perceived effects of a coaching program and holds meaningful implications for the development of common understandings of leadership.

Living the Learning

The theme of *Living the Learning* produced three main implications for practice. The first is the notion that having an understanding of a coaching model with clear roles and processes was important for participant growth and support. The second is the understanding that the way people used these structures deeply affected leadership and communication development. The third conclusion was that the presence of someone with extensive knowledge and experience in coaching impacted the learning of participants. While this conclusion affected the understandings of both the coaching model and ways of engaging with the model, it merits acknowledgement because it stands apart from both the structure and the participation. Group members did not identify this role as a lead coach or as a teacher of the coaching model. The role was described as a “big brother” or “someone to get feedback from to see if we’re going in the right direction”.

Understanding the structures. Participants referenced the coaching model often and expressed the value of this model as an effective guide for interactions and growth. As all participants save one had coach training, group members were able to reference a basic understanding of what roles may be and how these roles interact. In some cases participants had limited memory of the coaching model, in other cases they knew the model well but did not understand how to use the construct to interact with others. The understanding and application of a model and a common conceptualization of roles within the model are critical aspects of functional coaching relationships according to the research on coaching in education (Aguilar, 2017; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Close, 2013; Huff, Preston, & Goldring, 2013; James-Ward, 2013; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012; Knight, 2011; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). As the program progressed, participants articulated an increasingly clear distinction of the roles within the model, and further noted that they both understood and appreciated the peer dialogic nature of the coaching roles in this initiative. Group members stated that they were all equal partners in the coaching relationship, working together when coaching one of their peers. Participants also articulated that although they took on the role of co-coach or coachee in any given session, they did not carry a singular role designation throughout the program, moving back and forth between coach and coachee on a regular basis. This role fluidity resonates with the contention that a peer dialogic approach to coaching in groups can offer a structure that is clear and engaging, yet not restricted to singular roles of expert/inexpert (Alro & Dahl, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012).

Participating in the model. While the understanding of a coaching model and the roles within it was one aspect raised by participants in the study, another equally important consideration is the way in which group members participated in the model. The nature of this

participation focuses squarely on how participants grappled with the process, obstacles, and opportunities inherent to the coaching structure. This perception of participation differs from the mindset that participants needed to address at the outset of the program, as that mindset was an examination of general biases, assumptions, or fears that people brought to the coaching groups. This reflection on participation, by contrast, examines the ways that participants are seeking to apply the coaching model in order to help coachees move forward.

Most participants perceived that coaching was an attempt to help coachees move from where they were to where they would like to be. One coaching participant described this as “making the time to sit and listen, and to help people work through a plan, to help them to see how they can get to a better place.” They understood the coaching model, but applied it in a way that put coachee’s needs first, and engaged in what the literature describes as a partnership approach (Bloom et al., 2005; Knight, 2007; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). This approach within a coaching relationship asks the coach to partner through an intention to meet coachees at exactly where they are in their immediate context. Coaches align themselves as side-by-side partners who are looking for reciprocal curiosity and respect as they use the coaching structure. This stands in contrast to an expert position where coaches are simply trying to guide the coachee to a coach’s intended learning outcome. The partnership approach allows the partners to engage in deep discussion, action planning, and accountability, as the intention on both sides of the relationship is one of moving toward the coachee’s intended outcome (Bloom et al., 2005; Carraway & Young, 2015; Loving, 2011; Knight, 2007; Kostin & Haeger, 2006).

The partnership approach is also a direct reflection of the definition of coaching as provided by the International Coach Federation (2017) where they state that a coach is called to discover what coachees want to achieve, encourage their self-discovery, elicit coachee generated

solutions and hold coachees accountable to their choices. This application of the coaching model also ties closely to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of Zone of Proximal Development. Participants in the study spoke about partnering with coachees to move them out of their comfort zone to identify and execute small, challenging, but attainable steps towards their intended goals. This movement was often manifested through the application of a new perspective when looking at the problem, helping coachees to take graduated steps towards a goal that was attainable but challenging. This process reflects Vygotsky's (1978) contention that growth happens effectively when people are pushed just beyond their current capacities toward a goal that is both challenging and attainable. Participants made reference to a strategy they used that asked coachees to identify a "single smallest step" that they could take to move towards their intended goal. This became known as the Triple S and was referenced by some coaching group members as a powerful strategy to help coachees step outside of their comfort zone by taking smaller risks that were very attainable but challenging at the same time. Participants perceived these small steps as momentum generators that impacted coachees' abilities to achieve larger, more challenging goals.

Powerful questions and double-loop learning. The application of any effective coaching model requires participants to ask powerful questions (Bloom et al., 2005; Carraway & Young, 2015; Loving, 2011; Knight, 2007; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). According to Bloom et al. (2005), "Questioning is a powerful tool for helping a coachee clarify his own thinking, develop new interpretations, and discover new possibilities" (p. 41). The participants in this study exemplified this type of questioning within the program when they asked coachees to reflect on their assumptions and biases surrounding their leadership and communication abilities. This reflection is an example of movement beyond single-loop learning into double-loop learning

(Argyris & Schon, 1978), and is a powerful part of the coaching process both in this program and in the larger body of literature. Summarized by Brown and Grant (2010), single-loop learning is about making small adjustments—seeing a problem and fixing it immediately, and double-loop learning is about altering mental models and thinking. Double-loop learning requires a learner to see the problem and reflect on the assumptions or influences that led the problem solver to a certain set of options, thereby creating new options (Brown & Grant, 2010). Participant H explored assumptions when asked what discoveries occurred during the coaching. She stated “The whole assumption that as a leader or as an administrator I had to have all the answers. The idea too that I never had all the answers.” This type of revelation was echoed by many of the coaching participants when discussing the value of the program. Assumptions surfaced through the coaching dialogue for many participants.

Participants’ contention that they questioned their leadership actions and assumptions and by consequence refined their leadership frameworks exemplifies the reflection process of double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Brown & Grant, 2010). The implication of this type of learning for architects of professional development is that coaching helps leaders to reflect not only solutions to their problems, but provides opportunities to question the assumptions and biases that affect these solutions. The coaching model has an inherent opportunity to engage in double-loop learning.

One of the main differentiators between coaching and other forms of professional development is its ability to engage participants in praxis-based double-loop learning (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Effective coaching models include mechanisms for this type of reflection through the use of powerful questions and a coach’s ability to focus on the experience and thinking of the coachee (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Within the six sessions of the peer dialogic

coaching program, participants identified a greater capacity to ask powerful questions and expressed an ability and growing interest in understanding others in order to help them to move forward. These findings imply that coaching provides a navigable framework for development so long as participants understand the kind of partnership behavior necessary for growth.

Having an experienced guide. Participants' appreciation of having a trained and experienced coach as part of the group stood separate from the roles within the peer dialogic group coaching model. As the project initiator was perceived as a knowledgeable guide but not as the lead coach, participants described an increased sense of safety with the application of the coaching model. The experience of the initiator provided clarity surrounding roles and expectations for participation without framing the coaching relationships as hierarchical. Participants often asked the project initiator for feedback on the way people were participating in the coaching structures. The group members also expressed a gratitude for the initiator's non-intrusive manner and availability for timely feedback in the development of skills within the coaching model. This feedback was an important part of participants' growth, assuring them that they are in fact using the model in an effective way and helping them to reflect on some of the thoughts and behaviors that they had while engaging in the structures. As all of the participants were novices as coaches, they perceived value in having someone present to confirm their development and to help them conceptualize the transfer from group coaching experience to real-life application. The inclusion of an experienced and trained coach is important for group development (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Nicolaidou et al., 2017), but the experienced professional does not have to be the designated group coach, as participants noted that it is possible to be a co-participant in one moment and group resource in another.

The Value of Partnership

Participants frequently stated that they received great value from participating in the program. This value took the form of personal satisfaction, positive emotions, a perceived growth in their listening, leadership, and communication skills, and clearer models of leadership that they intended to take forward. On a personal level, participants found the experience of dialogic group coaching to be positive and pointed to the flat structure of the peer dialogic group experience as a facilitating factor for the establishment of trust and reciprocal learning and support. This perception echoes the research that stated dialogic peer coaching offers opportunities for trust and mutual understanding and can lead to powerful co-construction of leadership concepts (Alro & Dahl, 2015; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012).

Personal and organizational value; leadership frameworks. On both personal and organizational levels, participants identified value in the co-construction of frameworks for leadership and communication. These frameworks evolved from the partnership approach (Knight, 2007; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012) that governed participation in the coaching model. Participants described how this approach within the coaching interactions helped them to redefine their concept of leadership. Two co-constructed leadership and communication frameworks emerged from the data that repositioned the role of school leader in distinct ways.

The first, called *Directive vs. Partnership* in the study, was a repositioning from a hierarchical leader in a position of authority to a partner in learning and teaching. Participants communicated this framework in many ways, often mentioning a directive approach by name. Participant J aspired to “Just not being so directive. Even with kids too. Taking the time to not just like be, give them heck or whatever. Taking the time to understand their motivations and things like that. Have a discussion with them.” Within the coaching experience, participants

expressed a desire and increasing ability to move into a mindset where they were not the experts as coaches, but co-learners and guides through the coaching process. This newly refined conceptualization of development reflects the partnership approach outlined by Knight (2007) and van Nieuwerburgh (2012). Most participants noted that this partnership intention was present in the coaching relationships and perceived it as empowering and positive. They then expressed a desire to extend the partnership experience into their leadership practice. Participants demonstrated this as a desire and greater capacity to lead others through a flat partnership dynamic invested in learning. This perception closely aligns with Fullan's (2007) description of a lead learner, where he contends that an effective school leader is one who engages alongside teachers in the professional development and capacity building necessary for creating a culture of school success. The lead learner framework (Fullan, 2007) puts leaders and teachers side by side as learners, with relationships that are grounded in understanding and focused on the business of teaching and learning. The directive vs. partnership framework aims for a similar outcome as it aligns leaders and followers side-by-side with a focus on educational praxis.

The second framework, though similar to *Directive vs. Partnership*, is distinct as it addresses conflict resolution within educational leadership. The *Confrontation vs. Partnership* element emerged as participants were discussing challenging interactions between colleagues or between leaders and stakeholders. One participant stated:

A lot of the conflicts we talked about or the problems that we brought forth had to deal with two different sides, kind of going head-to-head at a problem, and so trying to figure out those conflicts, how we could move the situation forward by figuring out a common purpose or a common ground that allowed both sides to feel like they were moving forward and getting to a better place.

The primary difference between the two frameworks was the perceived starting point of the discussion. *Directive vs. Partnership* was often referred to as a function of hierarchical positioning, with a superior having the authority to direct a subordinate. This authority could be used in positive or negative situations and did not necessarily imply any kind of conflict. *Confrontation vs. Partnership* implies a difference of opinion, and the starting point in this leadership framework is a mindset that one person is right and the other is wrong. This framework sought to move the participants from adversarial conflict to partnership focused on a common understanding of the end goal. Fullan (2014) lists wrongheaded policy drivers that can negatively affect leadership, and within those drivers he references individualistic solutions and fragmented strategies. In contrast to these wrongheaded drivers are the drivers that Fullan (2014) contends lead to deeper student learning and higher achievement. These include capacity building and collaborative effort (Fullan, 2014). These drivers inform the emerging confrontation vs. partnership framework as they identify individualistic solutions (that are in this case at odds) and move participants toward collaboration as they build skills together. Much like *directive vs. partnership*, the end goal of *confrontation vs. partnership* is collaborative development geared toward student success. The main difference between the two frameworks is the awareness that leaders not only occupy positions of power but that they often encounter potentially confrontational situations that they can intentionally turn toward collaboration through a mindful application of the emergent framework. Both frameworks use the partnership principles (Knight, 2011) inherent to strong coaching as guides for deeper leadership practices with the potential for the creation of lead learner (Fullan, 2014) leadership within their schools.

Organizational value. A major implication for the school district is the co-construction of leadership understanding and a common language for its implementation. Fullan (2014)

coined the term “systemness,” which he describes as the ability of an entire system to engage in common meaning and collaboration. He states that a leader working alone can create a very good school, but to become and remain a great school a leader must be involved in a system that cultivates greatness across the organization (Fullan, 2014). Peer dialogic group coaching has proved effective as a means for individuals from different sites to come together to create a deeper understanding of practice (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012). In the case of this study, participants perceived peer dialogic group coaching as a powerful tool for a system-wide approach to leadership growth and development. While no one was required to participate in the pilot program, 12 of the 34 schools within school district X (SDX) were represented, offering participants the chance to create a much more commonly understood framework for leadership and communication within the district. The district received value through this emerging framework as leaders in all 12 buildings discussed increased collaboration with school leaders they had not worked with prior to the program. They created language and behaviors that brought an increased level of common understanding of effective leadership to the district.

Concluding thoughts

The perceptions within the four themes of this study (preconditions for development, presence required for growth, structures, and participation required for progress and the value to individuals and the organization) offer practitioners distinct elements to consider in the professional development of school leadership. This study addresses a gap in the current research as past studies of dialogic group coaching have focused on teachers (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012), dialogic groups with designated coaches (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Nicolaidou et al., 2017) or elderly

care administrators (Alro & Dahl, 2015). It answers in part the call of Charteris and Smardon (2014), who stated:

Although the peer coaches' practices appeared to enable shared leadership, an area for further investigation could be the experiences of the members of the professional learning communities in relation to their perceptions of how they were co-producing leadership practices. (p. 121)

This study contends that peer dialogic group coaching can facilitate trusting and meaningful relationships that in turn can lead to the co-production of leadership practices. However, for this co-production to take place, all elements described by participants and the research on coaching in education must be taken into account and intentionally addressed. Within the SDX pilot program, participants believed that failure to address even one of the elements could reduce the effectiveness of efforts to support and develop leadership practice in K–12 schools.

Recommendations for Action

A qualitative approach to formative program evaluation can offer insights that can contribute to practice or program improvement moving forward (Patton, 2015). The insights outlined in this study emerged from the perceptions of participants as they engaged in the peer dialogic group coaching (peer dialogic group coaching) pilot program in 2017.

Recommendations from this study grew directly from these perceptions as they were compared to other perceptions and to participant descriptions of how elements impacted growth. As an example, the first recommendation, setting out a clear intention, was born of the various iterations of participant perceptions that group members have to want to participate. Many stated that clarity around the intention of meetings helped participants to decide if they wanted to be there, thus producing opportunities for people to engage in the process. Different participants

described the ability to choose the topic of discussion and an assurance of confidentiality as just two examples of the nature of intention. The recommendations for School District X (SDX), based on these perceptions and their analysis and comparison to the larger body of coaching and leadership research, are as follows:

- Set out a clear intention for the program that outlines the logistics and conditions people can expect. Explain that the program will be grounded in leadership practice, that it will be necessary to attend regularly to reap potential benefits, and that participants will control the content of coaching sessions. Ensure that participants will have maximum confidentiality within sessions and do not use coaching as a means to evaluate performance.
- Make the program optional. A willingness to participate is key to the success of the coaching model in the eyes of participants. People who are forced to participate may not be able to adopt the necessary mindset or perspective for individual and group growth.
- Discuss the presence that is necessary for individual and group development. If participants are made aware early on of the biases and doubts that they carry into the coaching experience, they can discuss how these preconceived notions can help or hinder the professional development. This discussion also allows for an agreement on how individuals would like to engage in safety and trust as they work together.
- Use a coaching model and make sure everyone has a base level of coach training. Understanding a coaching model was perceived as critical to working with others in this construct. The model allowed participants to determine roles and maintain a partnership as equals within the coaching relationships. The model also supplied a tool for accountability that participants greatly appreciated.

- Supply supports that help participants understand how to engage in the model. Having an experienced and highly trained coach that understood group facilitation was a deeply appreciated element of the program. Participants reflected that knowledge of the model was only a part of program success. Feedback and support from someone with extensive experience helped participants to build coaching and leadership capacity.
- Spread the coaching sessions out over time and provide regular intervals for meetings. Making time during the working day would be an optimal solution for maintaining regular intervals, according to participants. If this is not possible, then the maintenance of a regular meeting time remains key to program momentum and progress. Sessions occurring every two weeks and lasting for one hour provided ample time for participants to apply coaching strategies in their schools and enough space within sessions for one or two participants to work through the coaching model as the coachee.

Each of these recommendations is dependent on all of the elements that were part of the perceived experience of peer dialogic group coaching participants. All of the elements are interconnected and interdependent, so a final recommendation for action is that program initiators have a deep understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of coaching and leadership, and are practiced in facilitation that does not impede group development. If all of the elements of the four themes are considered and discussed with participants, and group members can engage in the structure in a way that promotes trust and safety, then peer dialogic group coaching offers an opportunity for school-based administrators to build strong networks of leaders who can co-create powerful frameworks for leadership and communication.

Recommendations for Further Study

This formative program evaluation was not capable of determining any actual changes in leadership behavior as a result of the peer dialogic group coaching program. As it focused on perceptions, it offers only considerations for program improvement or future program construction. Further research examining the actual changes in leadership practice that take place during a similar program could inform the degree to which peer dialogic group coaching achieves its intended outcome. This type of research may, in turn, lead to an investigation of how leadership and communication changes influence student learning.

This study stands as an entry into the examination of a peer dialogic group coaching perspective for school based administrators. Future research could explore the nature of this type of coaching for leaders beyond the school level. Senior administrators such as superintendents or directors of education may also benefit from the peer dialogic group coaching model, and an investigation into the perceived effects for these leaders may lend additional insights to the perceptions that emerged from this study.

Conclusion

Peer dialogic group coaching provides opportunities for school based leaders to create deeply trusting relationships that allow for focused leadership and communication development. Participant perceptions of the pilot peer dialogic group coaching program in School District X confirmed many of the contentions found in the larger body of coaching and leadership research. These contentions included the recommendation that participants make time for regularly scheduled and well-attended meetings, and the necessity that development discussions be focused on professional practice (Bloom et al., 2005; Carraway & Young, 2015; Loving, 2011; Knight, 2007; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Other contentions include the importance of individual

and group commitment to building trust and safety, as well as an understanding of a partnership approach within a working knowledge of an established coaching model (Bloom et al., 2005; Brown & Grant, 2010; Garrett, 2008; Nicolaidou et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2016). There are also important leadership gains that can come from a peer dialogic group coaching approach, including the potential for co-constructed frameworks for leadership and communication and the possibility of creating a lead learner mindset beyond the coaching experience (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Fullan, 2007).

This study addresses a gap in the current coaching literature as it looks at the application of a peer dialogic group coaching approach to school-based leadership. Other studies of dialogic group coaching have focused on teachers (Charteris & Smardon, 2014; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012), dialogic groups with designated coaches (Aas, 2017; Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Nicolaidou et al., 2017) or elderly care administrators (Alro & Dahl, 2015). As such this study makes a unique contribution to the research on peer dialogic group coaching for school-based leadership.

Participant perceptions identified an opportunity to create deeply trusting relationships, showing that a group dialogic format is capable of achieving levels of trust similar to coaching dyads. Although participants were intentional in pointing out that there are many elements that require careful consideration to make this happen, they reported a profound level of trust once these elements were accounted for. This format provides lower-cost options for school districts that are looking to improve school-based leadership. Rather than employing a number of professional coaches to attend to many different school leaders, districts can employ one coach who can act as a resource for administrators who want to participate in the group model. While an initial investment in coach training would be necessary to facilitate the process, this cost is

significantly lower than employing multiple professional coaches with extensive experience. This approach would allow school districts to build capacity within their organizations by leveraging the leadership practices that already exist and using a consistent process to critically reflect on the effectiveness of these practices. A program of this type, if it remains attentive to all elements, allows for this increase of capacity to happen while at the same time building stronger relationships across the system.

Participants in the peer dialogic group coaching program perceived it as a valuable, enjoyable, and challenging experience. It offered a safe space for professional development and meaningful co-construction of leadership understanding. The language and concepts that emerged from the peer dialogic group coaching pilot program in school district X created opportunities for leaders to come together in an attempt to examine practice and improve it, which opens the door for greater function within schools and increased student learning.

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doi:http://dx.doi.org.une.idm.oclc.org/10.1108/20466851311323096

APPENDIX A
Permission Letter

School District X

December 11, 2017

Mike Chase
[Redacted]

Dear M. Chase,

RE: Leadership Development and Support: The Perceived Effects of a Dialogic Peer Coaching Program

I have received your request to continue to study, review data and confirm transcripts of data that had been collected through group coaching and discussions from fourteen [Redacted] School District X administrator participants.

You indicate your study seeks to evaluate the Peer Coaching Program through a discourse analysis of the data collected and "the purpose of the study is to identify benefits and drawbacks of this program through the perceptions of participants. This may allow for feedback that could influence the direction of program development if the division feels this work should continue".

You indicate that in January or February 2018 all participants will be offered the opportunity to review the data to confirm the accuracy of transcripts. They will have the opportunity to opt out of the study at that time. The dissertation will be completed by the end of April 2018.

Results from the study will be published as a dissertation and posted to the University of New England's digital repository. A copy of the dissertation will be supplied to [Redacted] School District X and you, as the researcher, will offer to do a presentation on the results for senior administration or other stakeholders (such as the school division Board of Trustees).

You have been granted provisional approval. As you intend to use school division data, you must supply a copy of your *Review Board Ethics Approval* form before proceeding.

Upon receipt of the ethics approval form you may continue with your study subject to the following conditions:

1. Administrator participation must be voluntary; they must be assured as to the confidentiality of their response and have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.
2. The names of participants and the [Redacted] School District X are not identified in the research.
3. [Redacted] Superintendent of Education Services shall receive results of your study.
4. The [Redacted] School District X will not be responsible for any possible costs to the division.

I wish you success in your research and look forward to seeing the results.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

Superintendent, Education Services

School District X

[Redacted]

APPENDIX B

Typology of Research Purposes

Table 1. Typology of Research Purposes

TYPES OF RESEARCH	PURPOSE	FOCUS OF RESEARCH	DESIRED RESULTS	DESIRED LEVEL OF GENERALIZATION	KEY ASSUMPTIONS	PUBLICATION MODE	STANDARD FOR JUDGING
Basic research	Knowledge as an end in itself; discover truth	Questions deemed important by one's discipline or personal intellectual interest	Contribution to theory	Across time and space (ideal)	The world is patterned; those patterns are knowable and explainable.	Major refereed scholarly journals in one's discipline; scholarly books	Rigor of research; universality and verifiability of theory
Applied research	Understand the nature and sources of human and societal problems	Questions deemed important by society	Contributions to theories that can be used to formulate problem-solving programs and interventions	Within as general a time and space as possible, but clearly limited application context	Human and societal problems can be understood and solved with knowledge.	Specialized academic journals, applied research journals within disciplines, interdisciplinary problem-focused journals	Rigor and theoretical insight into the problem
Summative evaluation	Determine the effectiveness of human interventions and actions (programs, policies, personnel, products)	Goals of the intervention	Judgments and generalizations about effective types of interventions and the conditions under which those efforts are effective	All interventions with similar goals	What works in one place under specified conditions should work elsewhere.	Evaluation reports for program funders and policymakers, specialized journals	Generalizability to future efforts and to other programs and policy issues
Formative evaluation	Improve an intervention: a program, policy, organization, or product	Strengths and weaknesses of the specific program, policy, product, or personnel being studied	Recommendations for improvements	Limited to the specific setting studied	People can and will use information to improve what they're doing.	Oral briefings; conferences; internal reports; limited circulation to similar programs, other evaluators	Usefulness to and actual use by intended users in the setting studied
Action research	Solve problems in a program, organization, or community	Organization and community problems	Immediate action; solving problems as quickly as possible	Here and now	People in a setting can solve problems by studying themselves.	Interpersonal interactions among research participants; informal unpublished material	Feelings about the process among research participants; feasibility of the solution generated

Note. Reprinted from *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (p. 250), by M. Q. Patton, 2015, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. Copyright 2015 by "SAGE Publications".

APPENDIX C

Interview Schedule

Administrator Coaching and Discussion Program

1. What was your experience of the coaching / discussion program?
 - a) What was the program for you?
2. What were the strengths of the coaching / discussion program?
3. What were the drawbacks of the coaching / discussion program?
4. How has your understanding of leadership changed?
 - a) How does this compare to Fullan's Lead Learner concept?
5. What key elements of leadership came through during the sessions?
 - a) What were your thoughts or reactions to these elements as they were addressed?
6. What actions or changes did you engage in as a result of the program?
 - a) Did you do anything differently in your work as a result of the program? If so, what?
7. Thinking of the sessions specifically, how did you feel during the meetings?
 - a) What were your thoughts during the meetings? After you left?
8. How has your use of coaching changed in your work as a leader?
9. What were the factors that made it easy or difficult to participate in the program?
10. What would you change about the program moving forward?
 - a) What would you keep the same?

APPENDIX D

Survey Questions

Administrator Coaching and Discussion Program

Survey—School District X Coaching and Discussion Groups

Hello, Colleagues. Thank you for being a part of the SDX admin coaching/discussion groups.

One of the intentions of this effort was to understand the benefits and drawbacks of this approach to collegial support and development. Please fill in the following survey to provide feedback on the program. All responses are completely confidential and any identifying information you choose to include will be removed before data is shared. The results will be used to provide formative feedback on the program and to offer administrators' thoughts should participants want to continue in the new year. Thank you for your time.

1. How many sessions did you attend?

1–2 sessions

3–4 sessions

5–6 sessions

2. Which format did you participate in?

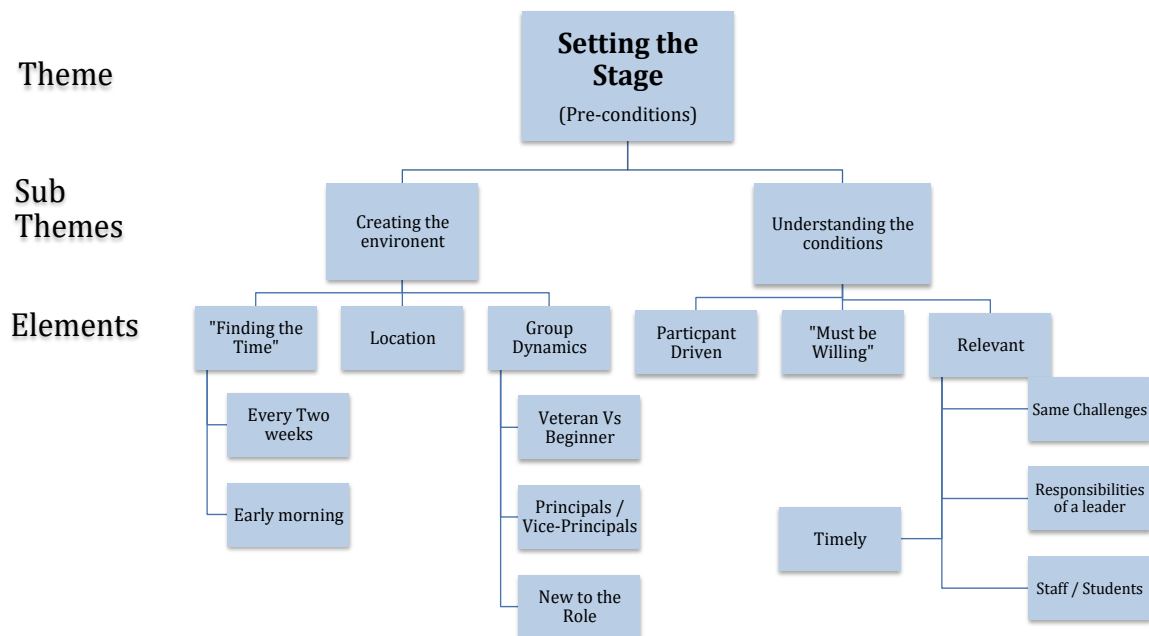
Coaching Group

Discussion Group

3. What was your experience of the coaching/discussion program? (NOTE: Responses are limited to about 575 words. If you need additional space, please feel free to fill out a second survey, write CONTINUED in the required text boxes, and then include the final sentence from this answer before elaborating in the appropriate answer box.)
4. What were the strengths of the program?
5. What were the drawbacks of the program?
6. What made it easy to participate in the program?
7. What made it challenging to participate in the program?
8. How did the program affect your understanding of leadership? (NOTE: Responses are limited to about 575 words. If you need additional space, please feel free to fill out a second survey, write CONTINUED in the required text boxes, and then include the final sentence from this answer before elaborating in the appropriate answer box.)
9. How did the program affect your understanding of communication?
10. Did your leadership practice change as a result of the program? If so, how?
11. How did the program affect your use of coaching within your leadership practice? (coaching groups only)
12. What would you change about the program if it continues?
13. What would you maintain if the program continues?

APPENDIX E

Theme One—Setting the Stage



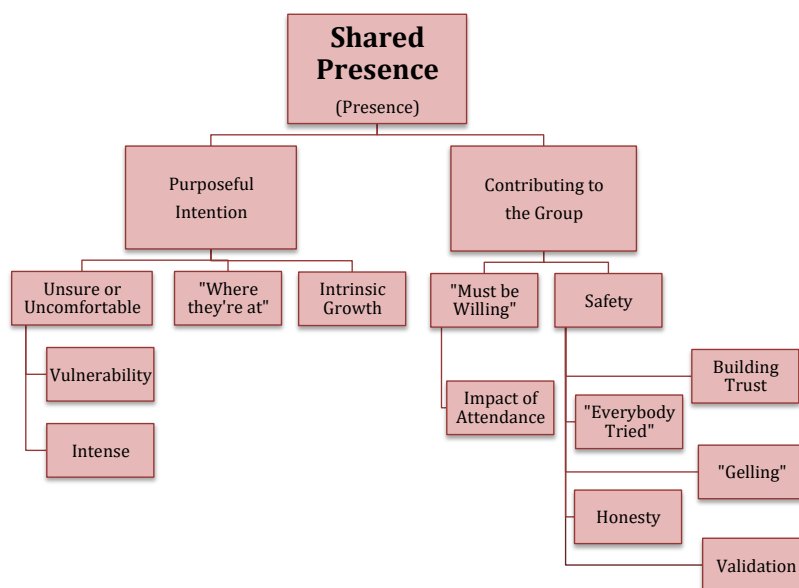
APPENDIX F

Theme Two—Shared Presence

Theme

Sub
Themes

Elements



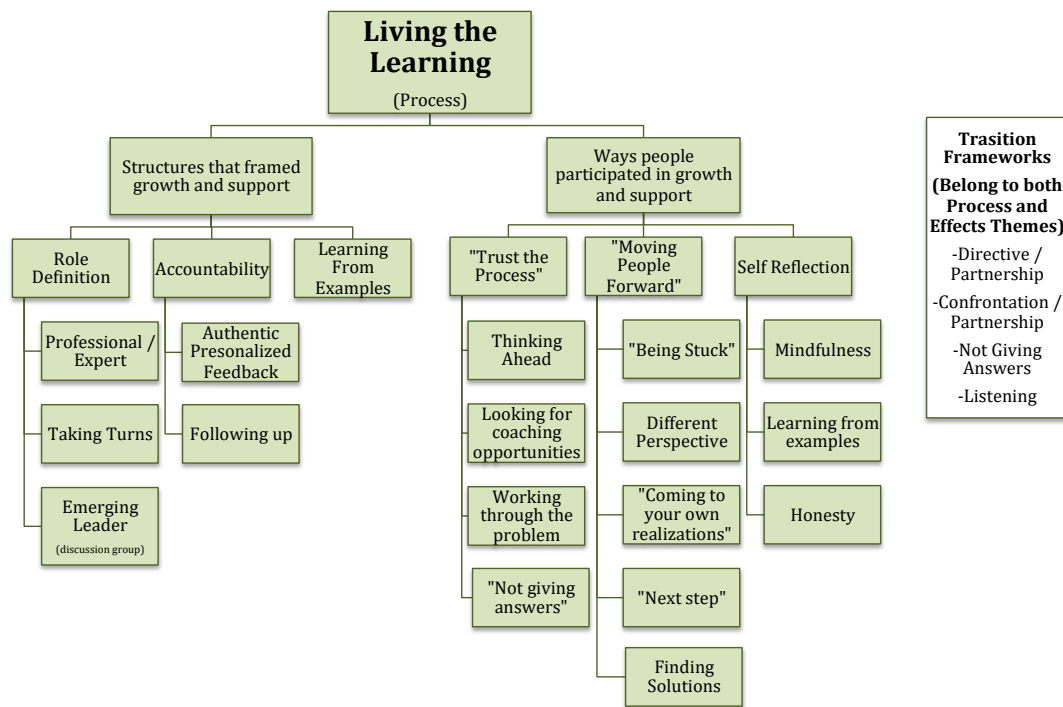
APPENDIX G

Theme Three—Living the Learning

Theme

Sub Themes

Elements



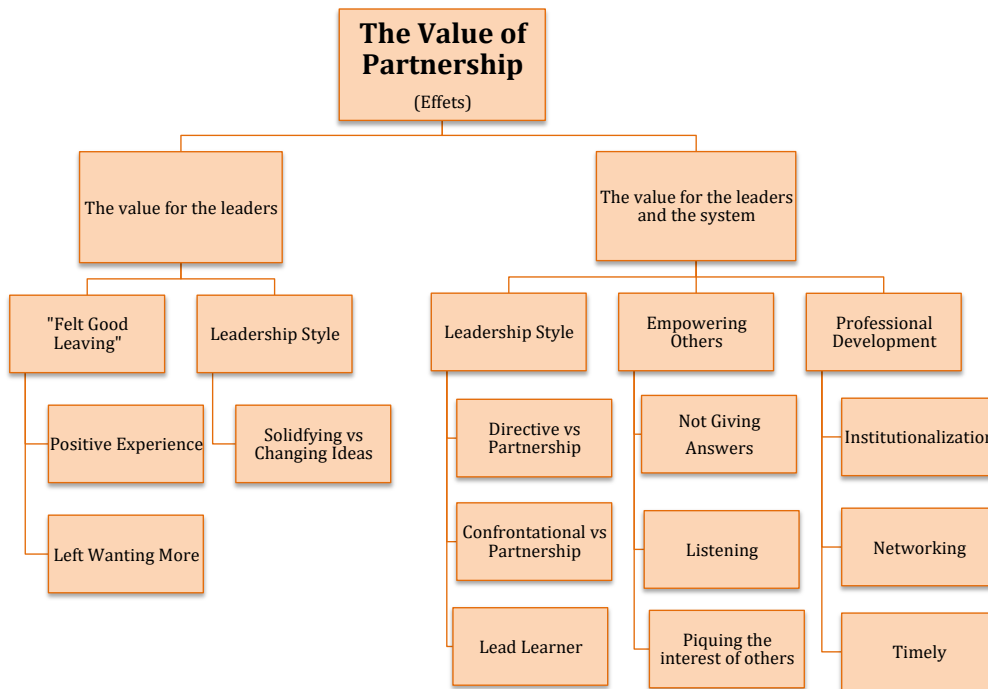
APPENDIX H

Theme Four—The Value of Partnership

Theme

Sub Themes

Elements



Transition Codes
(Belong to both Process and Effects Themes)

- Directive / Partnership
- Confrontation / Partnership
- Not Giving Answers
- Listening

APPENDIX I

Graphic Representation

Elements of the Coaching Program



Appendix J
IRB Exemption



Institutional Review Board
Olgun Guvench, Chair

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207)602-2244 T
(207)602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

To: Michael Chase
Cc: Brianna Parsons
From: Olgun Guvench
Date: December 21, 2017
Project # & Title: 120717-007, A Structure for Leadership Development & Support: The Perceived Effects of a Dialogic Peer Coaching Program (Initial)

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the above captioned project, and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Additional IRB review and approval is not required for this protocol as submitted. If you wish to change your protocol at any time, you must first submit the changes for review.

Please contact Olgun Guvench at (207) 221-4171 or oguvench@une.edu with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Olgun Guvench", written in a cursive style.

Olgun Guvench, M.D., Ph.D.
IRB Chair

IRB#: 120717-007
Submission Date: 12/5/17
Status: Exempt, 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)
Status Date: 12/21/17