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# LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NEWLY APPOINTED ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS WHO RECEIVE EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP COACHING

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LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NEWLY APPOINTED ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS WHO RECEIVE  
EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP COACHING

by

Scott A. Townsend

A Dissertation

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Kennesaw State University  
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in Educational Leadership  
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My journey into leadership coaching has not been alone. Thanks to Dr. Susan Banke, three of my colleagues and I received the moniker *Coaching Ninjas* as the first group of educational leadership students to earn the leadership coaching endorsement at Kennesaw State University. Those colleagues and I have spent the last two years collaborating on various aspects of leadership coaching which helped immensely in my work. To Dr. Banke and my Coaching Ninjas, I am grateful for your guidance and fellowship.

## DEDICATION

Abraham Lincoln said, “All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother.” My path in life has not been traditional and no matter the twists, obstacles, or changes in direction, my mother has always been my greatest supporter. I will never be able to adequately describe her abundance of patience and encouragement; without her in my corner this would not have been accomplished.

Daily I am amazed by the selfless dedication of the professional educators with whom I have been blessed to work side by side. Many of us acknowledge a teacher who made a lasting impact in our lives, but most do not have the privilege to witness those changes take place within so many students on a routine basis as I have experienced working in this profession. The unforeseen struggles students manage that are not related to academics and the teachers who go above and beyond to assist are not well known to the world. Nevertheless, professional educators attempt to fill the void the rest of society chooses to ignore. To those professional educators this work is also dedicated.

## ABSTRACT

### LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NEWLY APPOINTED ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS WHO RECEIVE EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP COACHING

by  
Scott A. Townsend  
Kennesaw State University, 2018

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenographic study was to understand how leadership coaching supported personal growth for new assistant principals. Newly appointed assistant principals from a suburban school district outside metro Atlanta, Georgia were interviewed as part of a professional development model which incorporated leadership coaching into the support mechanisms for new administrators. The professional development model, known as a leadership academy, was instituted by the school district and comprised of multiple learning opportunities of which leadership coaching was one component. This study gathered perceptions of newly appointed assistant principals regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of leadership coaching and the leadership academy for their personal leadership growth. From a constructivist worldview, in which reality is formed from personal experiences and has multiple meanings, a phenomenographic approach was used to gather data from assistant principals in the form of interviews. Those interviews were transcribed and analyzed through both open and axial coding for variations of participant perceptions toward the effectiveness of leadership coaching. The results show strong, positive perceptions toward the effect of leadership coaching on the reduction of stress, the ability to cope with new obstacles, and the overall positive use of leadership coaching for newly appointed school leaders.

*Keywords:* Assistant Principals, Executive Leadership Coaching, Professional Development, Phenomenology, Phenomenography

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background of Study**

The use of leadership coaching to increase capacity in successful employees has been used within the business community for decades starting in the 1990s. Leadership coaching can be described as the fostering of a supportive professional relationship between a coach and a client through the use of “cognitive and behavioral techniques in order to help the client achieve a mutually defined set of goals with the aim of improving his or her leadership skills, professional performance, and well-being and the effectiveness of the organization” (Grant, 2014, p. 259). The main tenets of leadership coaching are reducing stress and anxiety, establishing an environment for goal setting as well as solution creation, and assisting the client in establishing mechanisms for overcoming personal and professional obstacles (Grant, 2016; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2014; MacKie, 2014; Weinberg, 2016). Leadership coaching is not a mechanism for addressing unsatisfactory performance or inadequacies within an employee; instead, coaching is a tool for building capacity within successful employees to reach higher levels of potential (Aguilar, 2013).

#### **Professional Development of Educators**

Research has shown leadership coaching can be transformational in that if used effectively, the outcome can move a leader into greater levels of capacity and potential than is currently in place (Grant, 2014; Grant, 2016; Hanssmann, 2014; MacKie, 2014; Sonesh et al., 2015; Susing, 2016; Weinberg, 2016). As leaders move from one position to another a larger and wider vision and scope of understanding is required to create new paradigms for that leader.

Coaching has been an effective tool for widening the viewpoint of the leader in preparation for greater responsibility as his or her career moves forward.

As effective as leadership coaching has been found in building leadership capacity in private sector employees, its potential as part of a larger professional development plan for aspiring educational leaders may be increased exponentially. Intentional, persistent, and consistent deployment of a coaching component within an overall professional development program for employees can potentially increase the effectiveness of the coaching experience, overall professional development goals, and the capacity of the employees taking part as a combined plan for growth (Sonesh et. al., 2015; Susing, 2016). Professional development has traditionally had a one-size-fits-all mentality in that all who participate in the professional development received the same training (Mangin, 2014). The addition of a leadership coaching component to a professional development plan allows an organization to differentiate the experience for each specific employee in order to target individualized growth within every employee who receives coaching services.

Professional development for new assistant principals is lacking in specific goals and skills targeted toward individual school leaders, as many of the professional development programs deployed by school districts worldwide are based on a standardized, whole group mentality rather than custom designed for individual needs (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Enomoto, 2012; Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015; Harvey, 1994; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). Skill sets or knowledge which are deemed to be obligatory by school leaders become the focus of newly implemented professional development opportunities with a blind eye to the needs of the individual leader. The inclusion of a leadership coaching component to ongoing professional development can fulfil the individualized, specific needs of a school leader (Aguilar, 2017;

Cerni, Curtis, & Colmar, 2010; Farver & Holt, 2015; Ganly, 2017; Mangin, 2014; McGregor, 2011; Warren & Kelsen, 2013).

Increased accountability mandates on public schools have also amplified demands on the leadership of those schools. School leaders are tasked with a myriad of expectations and demands ranging from instructional leadership to school climate, along with managerial burdens such as budgeting, facility maintenance, and countless reporting requirements to government entities. Due to the ever-increasing accountability placed on schools and school leadership, research has focused on how to increase student achievement to meet those demands. Numerous studies linked effective school administration to positive school climate; teacher retention and effectiveness; improved instructional strategies; and increased student achievement (Warren & Kelsen, 2013). While Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter (2009) point out that multiple research studies note a correlation between effective school leadership and student achievement; few address the need to support school leaders in regards of stress and time management due to the increased accountability. The need for additional support mechanisms, such as coaching for school leaders to deal with additional accountability and demands, are necessary to sustain the profession.

### **Purpose of Study**

Sustainable leadership growth for building-level school administrators has been identified as a key component to increasing student achievement (Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of newly appointed assistant principals and their viewpoints on the effectiveness of leadership coaching on leadership potential through a leadership academy. Few studies exist analyzing the perceptions of new assistant principals using phenomenography as a methodology in relation to the use of executive



coaching for school leaders as part of leadership development. Furthermore, the creation of a professional development model which includes leadership coaching for school administrators has the potential to assist school leaders in reaching greater heights while benefiting all stakeholders of the school through increased student achievement. The findings of this study may inform the current or future knowledge base on executive coaching as a form of professional learning for assistant principals. Additionally, the perceptions of the newly appointed assistant principals in this study reveal struggles and obstacles faced by those new administrators which may strengthen future studies focusing on the needs of beginning school leaders.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Studies of professional development programs that strive to increase the capacity of school leaders routinely use student achievement data and other quantitative statistics to determine the effectiveness of those programs (Brown, Bynum & Beziat, 2017; Cotton, 2003; Karadag, 2017). However, few previous studies asked participants to describe their experiences and to express their perceptions through a qualitative lens. This study further advances the need for professional learning, as accountability has increased through the implementation of high stakes testing, rigorous teacher and administrative evaluation tools, and other requirements from national, state, and local governments which has added additional stressors for school administrators exponentially over the years (Allen & Weaver, 2014).

Executive leadership coaching has been shown to increase the capacity of those who receive such support with emotional and behavioral coping and constructive critical thinking skills (Cerni et al., 2010). The use of support mechanisms such as executive leadership coaching can address the need for school administrators to deal with the added stress of current mandates

and may also provide greater job satisfaction, increased employee retention, and greater advancements in student achievement.

### **Research Question**

This phenomenographic study addresses the following research question:

What is the lived experience of newly appointed assistant principals who receive executive coaching through a leadership academy?

Phenomenography was the chosen methodology to allow the researcher to analyze the perceptions of a group of new assistant principals' experiences who were receiving executive leadership coaching during their first year as school leaders.

### **Significance of the Study**

As leadership coaching continues to be recognized as being a viable aspect of professional learning, it is critical to develop coaching plans that are commensurate with the experience of school leaders. For instance, the professional learning needs of a beginning principal are most likely different from those of an experienced principal. This differentiation of learning may be more useful than one-size-fits-all coaching plans. Flexibility to design professional learning depending on the needs of the individual administrator is important as each situation will be different as dictated by the individual, the school, the community, and its struggles (Lochmiller, 2013). Although similar coaching strategies and models may be deployed, the choice of when and how to implement those resources needs to be determined by an experienced coach and based on the needs of the individual educational leader being served (Aguilar, 2013).

While research has shown a strong correlation between effective school leadership and student achievement, specific details as to what works in regards to building effective school

leadership is continuously evolving (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Weinberg (2016) notes the lack of substantial research into the efficacy of leadership coaching as well as the lack of evidence on the impact to those who receive coaching services. Data to support leadership coaching in the business world has expanded over the years; however, research to support the use of leadership coaching specifically in an educational leadership capacity is lacking.

Farver and Holt's study (2015) found "the support of an assigned executive coach was beneficial in having a thinking partner available for goal-planning, action-planning, or solution-focused planning" (p. 71), although their study was limited to three participants. Farver and Holt also noted the three principals in their study appreciated the use of coaching as "job embedded work" (p. 71) rather than additional, broad-based training; the use of individualized and specific support was valued by the participants. Warren and Kelsen (2013) state, "Leadership coaching is vital to the induction of early career principals, though there is relatively little in the literature about its effectiveness as measured by student achievement" (p. 18).

This study aimed to provide additional perspectives from beginning school administrators on the effectiveness of executive coaching on their practice and growth as school leaders. The results are intended to add to the growing data relating to the need for executive coaching embedded in a professional learning program for new school administrators, specifically to address the individual needs of beginning school leaders.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on transformational learning theory which was first posited by Jack Mezirow (1991). Mezirow suggests humans create meaning of their lives through their experiences (1997) and that true learning takes place as humans reform

their previous perceptions based on new experiences (Bouchard, 2013). The transformational learning that leadership coaching offers school leaders to be reflective learners supports the use of the theory as the framework for the study.

Mezirow (1997) defined transformative learning as “the process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a ‘meaning perspective’ to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of experience” (p. xii).

Furthermore, transformational learning is based on a constructionist philosophy in that individuals use experiences to create meaning (Cox, 2015). Both of these points are important in relation to this study as the research was focused on the perceptions and the experiences of the participants in regards to executive coaching and how they interpreted their experiences and growth as school leaders through the use of coaching.

Mezirow (1997) suggested humans move through eight phases of transformation as they experience obstacles and strive to find solutions (Cox, 2015).

1. Encountering an obstacle or dilemma—the individual is confronted with a new problem.
2. Self-examination—the individual assess his or her preconceptions of the problem.
3. Critical assessment of assumptions—the individual reflects on preconceptions and is open to new paradigms.
4. Recognizing shared similar experiences—a critical component of the transformational process; this presents the opportunity for individuals to consider other viewpoints and how those may affect their own preconceptions.
5. Review of options—the individuals reorganize the new viewpoints into their thinking processes.

6. Plan of action—the individual integrates the new thinking processes into a new understanding of how to incorporate those into practice.
7. Skills and information growth—if new skills and additional information are required for the new point of view to implemented.
8. Critical reflection—taking the new information and skills along with the new paradigm and integrating into the new thought processes.

Mezirow's phrases of transformation are aligned with research regarding the use of executive coaching and the outcomes associated with the use of coaching (Cox, 2015). However, the path for each individual is different; therefore, the aforementioned phases of transformational learning may not take place for each person (Cox, 2015). The transformational change may take considerable time to be fully realized as the reflection and acceptance processes take place at different intervals for each person (Bouchard, 2013).

As a certified leadership coach through the Georgia Professional Standards Commission with experience coaching students through Kennesaw State University and through a local school system's aspiring leaders' academy, the researcher is convinced of the increase in self-efficacy school administrators receive when participating in an executive leadership coaching program. The researcher's beliefs are concurrent with findings regarding self-efficacy and its increase through executive leadership coaching in the business sector.

The vast majority of previous studies utilize quantitative data such as limited surveys or statistical sets such as student achievement data to determine the effectiveness of support mechanisms such as executive leadership coaching (Cerni et al., 2010; Ganly, 2017; Nieminen, Smerek, Kotrba, & Denison, 2013; Warren & Kelsen, 2013). The goal of collecting participant perceptions through this study was to add their voices to the growing literature of school

administrator concerns, obstacles, and successes, along with the theorized success of utilizing executive leadership coaching as a support for new school leaders. The use of phenomenography as a research method was based on the lack of previous studies to employ such a method to gather and analyze participant perceptions on the use of executive coaching with new assistant principals.

### **Review of Relevant Terms**

This research study used the following terminology:

- Assistant Principal—a school leader who reports to a school principal with the responsibility of following national, state, and local laws, regulations, and mandates.
- Executive Leadership Coaching—a support mechanism to increase the self-efficacy of an influential leader.
- Mentoring—most often a senior co-worker, within the same organization, whose task is to guide and advise on the day-to-day routine of the work environment. The mentor usually is expected to be a role model for the assigned employee (Cleary & Horsfall, 2015).
- Phenomenography—a qualitative research method intended to gather and analyze the perceptions of participants in relation to an identified phenomenon.
- Perception—the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.).
- Self-Efficacy—the “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1995, p. 2).

## **Organization of the Study**

The organization of the study is based on the five chapter dissertation model. Chapter 1 offers the background of coaching, the purpose of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, conceptual framework, and a review of relevant terms. Chapter 2 contains the theoretical framework of the study along with a review of literature, including many aspects of coaching as well as multifaceted views of assistant principals and their needs. Chapter 3 contains the researcher's worldview, research traditions, participant data, and data collection as well as analysis. Chapter 4 reveals the findings of the research while Chapter 5 specifies the conclusions of the research along with implications and future research considerations.

## **Graphical Overview of the Study**

Building-level administrators such as assistant principals currently receive professional development opportunities via degree programs through institutions of higher learning and the school districts in which they work. Additional learning opportunities come from work experiences, or on-the-job activities, as specified by school leadership. However, precise and targeted growth opportunities are limited, and most training is not individualized for the specific leader, nor are those opportunities intended for self-efficacy growth. Figure 1 demonstrates these concepts in graphical form.

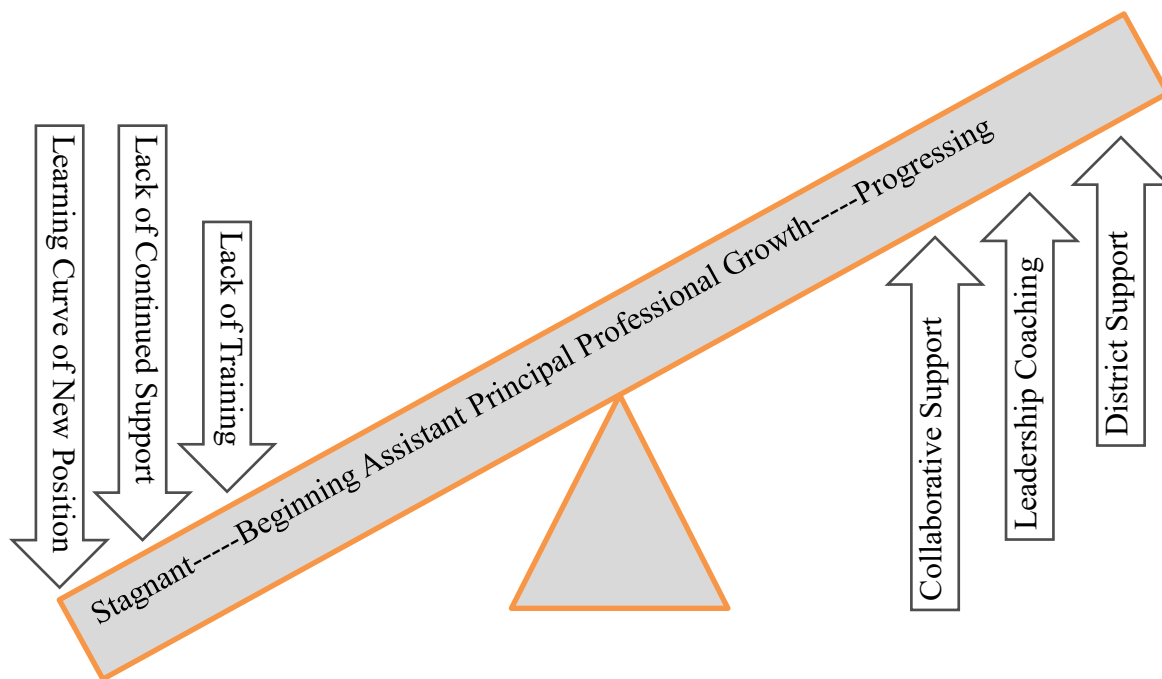


Figure 1: Graphical Overview of the Study



## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a coach as, “an expert who trains someone learning or improving a skill, especially one related to performing” (n.d.). For the past several decades leadership coaching has moved from the sports world into business and self-help realms. Whereas “life” coaches are used by individuals intent on personal growth and improvement, “executive” leadership coaching is used to improve employee aptitude (Gebhardt, 2016). De Haan, Bertie, Day and Sills define executive coaching as, “the professional development of executives through one-to-one conversation with a professional coach” (2010, p. 607). This literature review includes information from multiple sources including EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, and ProQuest databases along with texts found through the Kennesaw State University’s library and Google Scholar search engines. The search for keywords such as *leadership coaching*, *professional development*, and *assistant principal* was scarce when combined. While there is a growing amount of literature on leadership coaching and separately an expansive listing on professional development, there is a scarce amount of research combining coaching as a professional learning tool for assistant principals.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is connected to the conceptual framework regarding transformative learning; specifically, how adult learning is characterized by changes in previous conceptions due to new knowledge or experiences and the use of critical reflection. Obstacles faced by new assistant principals in an unfamiliar role present opportunities for

reflection and growth from which the implementation of a coaching program to support that growth may increase the leadership capacity of individual school leader.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on studies by Casebeer and Mann (2017), Kokkarinen and Cotgrave (2013), and Rivers, Nie and Armellini (2015), in which transformative learning and phenomenography were used to study participant perceptions. Due to the lack of transformative learning and phenomenographic research in relation to coaching for school leaders, the studies in which this theoretical framework was based was not an exact match; however, those studies formed the foundation for the use of transformative learning theory and phenomenography for this research. In each of these previous studies the collection of participant data was conducted through interviews whereby the perceptions of the participants were analyzed to explain their viewpoints on a phenomenon.

This study also used a social constructivism viewpoint in that individuals create meaning out of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Stake (2010) suggests there is no true meaning that is universal to all individuals in relation to an event or phenomenon; rather each is interpreted individually and therefore may be experienced differently. Furthermore, Schwandt (2005) asserts that the experiences of humans through reflective thinking develop into personal meaning for the event or phenomenon. Thus, a social constructivism stance was appropriate for this study as newly appointed assistant principals shared their variation of perceptions on the use of leadership coaching through a professional development academy.

### **What is coaching?**

Leadership coaching is used as a support mechanism to build capacity within leaders of an organization in line with the organization's mission and goals (Cerni et al., 2010; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2014; Iverson, 2016; MacKie, 2015; Sperry, 2013). Leadership coaching is normally

a one-to-one endeavor with a coach who is outside of the organization in what Weinberg (2016) describes as a “safe” environment where the “client” is free to express him- or herself without intervention by the organization. Susing (2016) points out that executive coaching should be used as a top-down model for professional development; if the strategy is only used for those moving into the top echelon of an organization the practice of coaching can be interpreted as merely a step into a higher position rather than a transformational, capacity-building opportunity for the employee. Leadership coaching should not be seen as the magic bullet of professional development; rather it should be used in conjunction with additional forms of advanced training to build leadership within an employee (Susing, 2016). Executive leadership coaching also should not be viewed as counseling, as the employee being coached, or client, is assumed to be psychologically well-balanced and only partaking in the coaching as a means to increase self-efficacy (Gebhardt, 2016).

### **Coaching Versus Mentoring**

Confusion exists between the contexts of leadership coaching and mentoring for professional development; however, the terms *coaching* and *mentoring* are not interchangeable. Cleary and Horsfall (2015) identify mentoring as an ongoing support mechanism by a colleague within an organization whereas they define coaching as “mostly short-term and focused on specific performance issues or events” (p. 243). Aguilar (2013) points out four non-coaching facts: “Coaching is not a way to enforce a program, is not a tool to fix people, is not therapy, and is not consulting” (p. 19). Whereas mentoring can be a support tool for addressing inadequacies in performance or to provide direct guidance for policy and procedures; coaching is a capacity-building support mechanism for adding to the potential of a successful employee. Farver and Holt (2003) note leadership can be perceived as lonely with few safe confidants available for

school leaders to share ideas or concerns. While leaders such as newly appointed assistant principals may benefit from a mentor; the role of a coach is more formal and targeted for employee growth (Aguilar, 2017). Warren and Kelsen (2013) note numerous studies have evaluated the use of mentoring programs for assistant principals; however, few studies are devoted to the use of leadership coaching for assistant principals.

### **Effectiveness of Coaching (Transformation)**

Executive leadership coaching for educators has the potential to facilitate transformational change in the client; a fundamental modification to the client's paradigm which builds capacity to grow (Hanssmann, 2014). Sonesh et al. (2015) lists five areas in which leadership coaching can improve an employee including "performance, coping, work attitudes, goal-directed self-regulation, and well-being" (p. 190). Similarly, Gyllensten and Palmer (2014) found coaching in general is effective at increasing employee self-confidence which leads to increased job satisfaction and capacity building. Farver and Holt (2015) state the intent of leadership coaching is to build support for the clients in their professional as well as personal lives while increasing listening skills and boosting confidence in school leaders. However, Hanssmann (2014) points out that clients must be devoted to the process of change through coaching in order to experience a significant outcome; clients should understand, accept, and be comfortable with the coach as well as open to the practice. Coaching can also be effective at reducing stress on executive-level employees as well as increasing resilience in stressful environments (Weinberg, 2016).

### **Beginning Assistant Principal Needs**

The role of assistant principal has existed in the United States since the 1930s; however, in-depth study of the position was not taken until the 1970s by the National Association of

Secondary School Principals (Gurley et al., 2015). Since the 1970s, the explicit needs of beginning assistant principals are documented, identifying multiple support mechanisms which are critical to the success of the beginning educational leader and their schools (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Boerema, 2011; Bush, 2009; Lochmiller, 2013). Each year additional learning goals, expectations, and mandates are placed on schools (Allen & Weaver, 2014) requiring administrators to be “educational visionaries and change agents, to leaders of instruction, curriculum and assessment specialists, budget forecasters, facility supervisors, special programs directors, and community planners” (Farver & Holt, 2015, p. 68). Neufeld and Roper (2003) note administrators are expected to collaborate with multiple stakeholders while forever increasing student achievement.

Increasing mandates by lawmakers on schools have impacted working conditions creating a shortage of eager and talented candidates for current and future school leadership openings (Warren & Kelsen, 2013). The accumulative requirements on schools for student achievement coupled with little consistency of the purpose or role of the assistant principal as one of the least researched positions in education (Harvey, 1994) leaves a gap in understanding of the assistant principalship.

Few studies place the spotlight on the assistant principalship; rather, most are dedicated to the role of principalship. Oliver (2005) took on the task of investigating the needs of assistant principals and listed instructional and content knowledge as one of the skill sets new assistant principals request along with increased preparation in legal, financial, and conflict management understanding. In addition to reporting a lack of managerial and leadership training, many beginning administrators express self-doubt in their abilities once confronted with the complexities of the principalship; therefore, building self-confidence in their own capacity to

lead a school is another profession-specific task for a leadership coach when dealing with first-time school administrators (Forde, McMahon, Gronn, & Martin, 2012).

### **Assistant Principals' Professional Learning**

The development of professional learning for most aspiring assistant principals starts through the progression of leadership roles in the classroom such as lead teacher, department chair, or participation in school committees (Enomoto, 2012). As teachers progress through these in-house leadership roles most move onto formal certification through university courses (Enomoto, 2012). However, most assistant principals express a lack of preparation for their ever changing role (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Enomoto, 2012). Oleszewski et al. (2013) noted the lack of dedicated professional learning programs specifically for the role of assistant principals as most professional preparation is geared toward the role of principalship which quite often is much different. An administrator's transition can be a challenging time not only for the leader but for the stakeholders of the school as a whole, "...evidence suggests that a school's transition to a first-time administrator adversely affects students and school outcomes of interest" (Bastian & Henry, 2015, p.601).

The role of the assistant principal is misunderstood and rarely standardized from district to district or school to school (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Most assistant principals are regulated to more managerial responsibilities rather than overseeing instructional and curriculum development in their schools (Gurley et al., 2015). Educational reformers suggest a comprehensive review of the assistant principal role to include more emphasis on instructional, curricular, and stake holder development in order to properly prepare those beginning school leaders for the principalship (Gurley et al., 2015; Schultz, Mundy, Kupczynski & Jones, 2016). However, Enomoto (2012) found the uses of "leadership academies, mentoring, coaching,

targeted in-serving and career development” (p.263) are effective professional learning efforts to increase the capacity of beginning assistant principals.

Professional organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) developed specific materials, resources, and online discussion posts for assistant principals resulting from their recognition of further refinement of the role of assistant principal as future principals (Allen & Weaver, 2014). A few school districts created in-district professional learning for aspiring leaders, many consisting of a yearlong series of meeting and job specific assignments for employees exploring the idea of moving into different roles. Such in-house programs are found in Miami-Dade County, Florida and New York City in which specific needs of assistant principal development are targeted (Allen & Weaver, 2014). These in district programs are intended to grow future school leaders from within the organization through leadership coaching, networking, and introduction to district staff and departments (Allen & Weaver, 2014). Yet, this type of professional development specifically to increase the capacity of assistant principals within a school district is uncommon in American education with most intended for recruitment rather than professional development goals (Gurley et al., 2015).

### **Coaching Assistant Principals**

As leadership coaching continues to gain prominence in the business world it has slowly expanded into the educational profession. Leadership coaching has been established as a support mechanism to increase an employee’s potential through the use of a relationship between a coach and a client (the employee) to achieve targeted goals set by the employee themselves (Sonesh et al., 2015; Farver & Holt, 2003). Yet the use of coaching specifically towards educational leaders continues to be based on the same concepts used in business coaching (Huff, Preston & Goldring, 2013; Lochmiller, 2013; Mangin, 2014; Wise & Hammack, 2011). The growth of

strategies and models as well as research into its effectiveness has expanded the overall practice of leadership coaching; however, there is only slight research into coaching to support beginning assistant principals and its effectiveness for student achievement and professional growth (Huff et al., 2013; Lochmiller, 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011). What research is available has shown a correlation to student achievement through the use of coaching of educational leaders; however, additional research is needed (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Boerema, 2011; Bush, 2009; Huff et al., 2013; Lochmiller, 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011).

Successful assistant principals who survived the tumultuous transition into school administration suggest the strategy of providing honest and ongoing feedback on their practice as vital (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Boerema, 2011; Enomoto, 2012; Huff et al., 2013). While considerations for coaching building-level assistant principals are similar to that of business leaders, the context of the educational leader is paramount when creating a leadership coaching plan. Building leadership capacity and providing time for feedback and personal reflection are specific coaching needs for educational leaders (Aguilar, 2017). Grant (2014) argues the use of executive coaching during times of change is needed to build psychological wherewithal in the leader while also supporting organizational goals. Therefore, the use of coaching as a support mechanism for beginning administrators should be considered as part of the transition process for educational leaders into a first-time principalship (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Boerema, 2011; Bush, 2009; Huff et al., 2013; Lochmiller, 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011).

### **The Leadership Coaching Process**

Enomoto (2012) notes many “administrators feel isolated, overwhelmed, and overworked” (p. 263) especially in their first years transitioning into school leadership. Weinberg (2016) found the use of leadership coaching can be a preventative approach to



significant “psychological strain during a period of challenging change” (p. 103) such as that experienced by new school administrators. Coaching beginning assistant principals may be considered as both formal and informal support mechanisms in an effort to expand the capacity of the educational leader (Boerema, 2011; Lochmiller, 2013). Quickly and efficiently building trust between the coach and client is key to a lasting and effective coaching relationship (Forde et al., 2012; Huff et al., 2013; Lochmiller, 2013; Sonesh et al., 2015; Wise & Hammack, 2011). Farver and Holt (2003) found school administrators valued open conversations and constructive feedback provided through their coaching sessions as instrumental to focusing on the heart of issues they faced both professionally and personally. Feedback must include time for reflection and should be incorporated into a leadership coaching strategy (Forde et al., 2012; Hanssmann, 2014; Huff et al., 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011). This reflective practice should include “targeted questions about the feedback that required principals to review specific conditions in their schools” (Huff et al., 2013, p. 519) in an effort to tie their own performance and ideology into the realities of the school context (Forde et al., 2012).

Beginning assistant principals also expressed the lack of preparation especially in the areas of stress and time management as repeatedly noted in national studies (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Boerema, 2011; Huff et al., 2013; Enomoto, 2012; Wise & Hammack, 2011). Therefore, leadership coaching discussions of time management and stress along with the establishment of specific goals to deal with these issues should be included in the coaching strategy with assistant principals. Previous studies suggest leadership coaching to be beneficial as “a thinking partner available for goal-planning, action-planning, or solution-focused planning” (Farver & Holt, 2003, p. 71) which may assist clients in dealing with stress and time management issues. Time constraints of the school leader should also be considered as administrators are quite often pulled

in multiple directions throughout the school day resulting in few opportunities to meet with a coach. Leadership coaching sessions should be limited to one or two sessions per month and allowed to be flexible in the manner in which the session is held whether in person, by phone, or via digital conferencing to meet the needs of the client (Wise & Cavazos, 2017; Wise & Hammack, 2011).

While there is no requirement for a leadership coach to be a former school administrator, it is important for the coach to possess a thorough understanding and expertise in leadership, to be well versed in emotional intelligence, and have experience helping adults through the growth and change process (Aguilar, 2017). It is also essential for the coach-client relationship that the client feels safe to participate in open discussions free from the threat of supervisory intervention; therefore many coaches are found outside of the organization and the in-house chain of command (Cleary & Horsfall, 2015). Therefore, most new school administrators may be more comfortable working with a prior school leader as a coach and with someone who is not directly in the clients' supervisory hierarchy (Wise & Cavazos, 2017).

The role of a leadership coach as a non-supervisor is further supported by Aguilar (2017) who advocates school administrators need an impartial outsider in order to open up and share their hopes and fears confidentially. Intense, committed and confidential listening is listed as one of the powerful benefits of leadership coaching by school administrators who received services from a professional coach (Farver & Holt, 2003). The use of topic selection at the beginning of the session, paraphrasing, as well as frank and truthful feedback, were noted by Farver and Holt (2003) as leadership coaching best practices favored by school administrators.

Sonesh et al. (2015) found the coach-client relationship is strengthened by trust, empathy, and collegiality exhibited by the coach as well as strong listening skills followed by the use of

reflective and thorough review of agreed-upon goals. Establishing clear expectations of the coach-client relationship is important as reported by previous beginning principal clients (Forde et al., 2012) as well as business executives (Sonesh et al., 2015). Furthermore, Aguilar (2017) supports job-embedded leadership coaching that is tied to specific identified needs of the school as well as the explicit needs of the administrator as the foundation of any school leadership coaching program.

### **Coaching for School Leaders**

Solution-focused leadership coaching, according to Farver and Holt (2003), is constructive to facilitate the building of self-efficacy in the leader while developing solutions to specific obstacles with the guidance of a coach. This supports the buy-in of school administrators as the solutions are self-created and therefore more likely to be carried out with greater fidelity (Farver & Holt, 2003). The strategy focuses on real-world, job-embedded issues which provide meaningful solutions while also building capacity in the school leaders (Cleary & Horsfall, 2015; Farver & Holt, 2003).

Goal-focused coaching is referenced as a primary effective measurement of leadership coaching for school leaders (Farver & Holt, 2003). Researchers noted the effectiveness of coaching can be increased if used in conjunction with organizational goals and expectations (Bozer, Joo, & Santora, 2015; Cerni et al., 2010). Cleary and Horsfall (2015) state most coaching scenarios are combined personal growth initiatives with job specific goals. Correia, Rebelo dos Santos and Passmore (2016) describe this type of leadership coaching as “external” with the focus on organizational goals. Bozer et al. (2015) postulate that the use of leadership coaching for goal attainment can increase the organizational commitment of the person being coached.

Reflection-focused coaching assists school leaders in the development of self-reflection techniques to increase their positive processing of their actions. Aguilar (2013) supports the notion that coaching can be transformational in helping school leaders to be reflective of their practice to increase their self-efficacy. Cerni et al. (2010) suggest the development of constructive, reflective thinking can transform leaders' paradigms of thinking into seeing obstacles from a positive stance of opportunity rather than a threat. Aguilar (2013) argues a critical element of coaching is developing the self-reflective part of leaders' processing of their actions in order to be self-aware of their personal belief systems. Correia et al. (2016) consider self-reflective coaching as "internal" coaching which is attentive to the client's individual development rather than on operational goals. The success of reflection-focused coaching, and to some extent all coaching variations, is dependent on the clients' willingness to open up to the coach and the relationship established between the two (Jones, Woods & Hutchinson, 2014).

### **Coaching for Social Justice**

A cornerstone of American public education has been to provide equal access and opportunity to all students, this goal aligns with the National Association of Social Workers' definition of social justice as, "the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities" (n.d., para. 1). The fight for social justice has been waged in classrooms throughout America's schools for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues to be a contentious subject in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Berkovich, 2014). American public education has steadily progressed from the early objective of providing basic literacy skills to the children of a newly-formed nation, to providing increasingly complex skills and knowledge for a growing industrial complex, to the realm of social justice issues including individual rights and freedoms (Fowler, 2013). However, Fennimore (2016) suggests policy makers may only enjoy

cursory knowledge of social justice issues in American public schools while educators daily face the challenges students endure outside of the academic arena. Berkovich (2014) contends the struggle for social justice is a moral responsibility of school leaders to meet the needs of marginalized individuals in order to benefit society as a whole. Many see school leaders as having the responsibility “to create a more just and equitable society” (McCarther, Davis, Nilsson, Marszalek, & Barber, 2013, p. 98). Yet, dealing with social justice issues in a school is an enormous undertaking and is not accomplished by accident (Theoharis, 2007).

Berkovich (2014) posits that inequality affects school climate in the form of increased student discipline, lower achievement, and lower self-expectations and perceptions. The effect of social justice issues in a school can be counterproductive to teaching and learning goals and therefore must be addressed. Theoharis (2007) bluntly states, “Marginalized students do not receive the education they deserve unless purposeful steps are taken to change schools on their behalf with both equity and justice consciously in mind” (p. 250). School administrators need the tools and wherewithal to foster a school climate that supports collaborative, critical-thinking citizens in a modern, heterogeneous society (McKenzie et al., 2008). Theoharis (2007) theorizes school administrators need to engage in deep reflection of both their understanding of the social justice issues in their schools as well as how they can mobilize the stakeholders of the school to deal with those issues.

Understanding social justice issues in a school is only part of the issue; school administrators must also be able to advocate for their students and the need to address the social justice concerns within the school. The Oxford Dictionary defines *advocacy* (n.d.) as “public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy,” which corresponds to the pivotal role school administrators have in regards to school policy. Theoharis (2007) defines social

justice leadership as “principals mak[ing] issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). Brown (2004) points out that several studies consistently found minority students and those in lower socioeconomic circumstances possess “lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources” (p. 79). Brown (2004) postulates advocacy of social justice issues in schools, which “underscores the urgent need to confront socially difficult topics with respect, dialogue, and a continuous expansion of awareness, acknowledgement, and action” (p. 80).

Capper and Young (2014) established four areas in which a social justice advocate school leader should focus: inclusion strategies for all students both academically and socially; increased student achievement across all subgroups; self-development of social justice issues in their own schools and communities; and inclusion of school stakeholders in the development of socially just policies and practices at the school. Modern school administrators need to understand their impactful role on social justice as change agents and public education advocates (Fowler, 2013); professional learning strategies such as coaching may assist administrators in the development of reflective practices to understand their school’s social justice issues and needs. McCarther et al. (2013, p. 97) suggest school leaders who advocate for social justice issues in their school possess “the following attitude as observable traits: caring, nurturing, empathy; sensitivity to injustice; and behavior, including the courage to initiate actions; willingness to go at it alone; and relentless commitment to all children.”

Helping school administrators to become self-reflecting and cognitive of social justice issues is one of the goals of coaching. Coaching has the potential to increase the efficacy of educators as well as instill the tools for reflection and contemplation (Aguilar, 2013), which may

benefit social justice issues within the school leaders' area of influence. In 2004 the Annenberg Institute for Education Reform reported the use of coaching encourages collaborative, collegial connections among school and community stakeholders and increases discussion of student achievement, pedagogy, accountability as well as social justice issues. Aguilar (2013) suggests effective coaching can be used throughout a school to increase collaboration among stakeholders of the school to instill positive change relating to school climate and professional development goals as well as student and staff support.

### **Transformational Coaching Model**

Aguilar identifies three areas in which a school leader needs to be strong including behaviors, beliefs, and being (Aguilar, 2017). Through Aguilar's model (2017) behaviors include the managerial operation of a school such as conducting meetings, interacting with stakeholders, and interpreting data. Aguilar's model encompasses the vision and theories subscribed by the leader while the being portion of the model includes the leaders' emotional intelligence. Aguilar (2017) points out that most coaching of school leaders concentrates merely on the behaviors of the client while the beliefs and being of the client are neglected.

The proceeding literature review indicates leadership coaching has been found to be an effective professional learning tool to increase the capacity of a successful employee (Grant, 2014; Grant, 2016; Hanssmann, 2014; MacKie, 2014; Sonesh et al., 2015; Susing, 2016; Weinberg, 2016). Previous literature has also identified a gap in the specific professional development needs of assistant principals (Oliver, 2005). Former studies show a correlation between the increased capacities of school leaders as having a substantial effect on student achievement (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2009). Therefore, the use of a leadership

coaching component within a larger professional learning program for assistant principals should positively impact student achievement.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the lived experiences of assistant principals who received executive coaching as part of their professional development as school leaders. This study was a qualitative phenomenography study, which by nature, was comprised of a small target group of participants. Phenomenography is unique in that, “the object of study in Phenomenographic research is not the phenomenon being discussed per se, but rather the relation between the subjects and that phenomenon” (Bowden, 2005, p. 12). The intent is to develop a hierarchy of perceptions to explain a phenomenon (Marton, 1986; Trigwell, 2000) which in this case is from newly appointed assistant principals in a mid-sized suburban school district outside of metro Atlanta, Georgia.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” while quantitative research is “a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables” (p. 4). For most research the differences between qualitative and quantitative research has been types of data collected as well as the frameworks employed in a study (Landrum & Garza, 2015). Stake (2010) suggests qualitative studies are special due to their inclusion of interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic features which attempt to explain meaning to the personal experiences of humans in various situations. Newman and Benz (1998)



assert quantitative research is appropriate to confirm a theory whereas qualitative research is appropriate to detect and construe reality with the goal of theory development. Yilmaz (2013) states, “qualitative research is based on the epistemological assumption that social phenomena are so complex and interwoven that they cannot be reduced to isolated variables” such as those used in a quantitative studies (p. 311). The interest regarding the development of human understanding in relation to phenomena is the focus of this study and therefore why qualitative research was appropriate.

### **Phenomenography**

Phenomenography was first coined by Ference Marton in 1981 as a means to describe a sample groups’ lived experience in dealing with a specific phenomenon (Forster, 2016). Marton (1981) describes phenomenography research as a method that strives to provide “description, analysis and understanding of experiences” (p. 177) of the phenomenon and the subjects within the study. Marton and Booth (1997, p. 111) go on to label phenomenography as “an interest in describing the phenomena in the world as others see them, and in revealing and describing the variation therein.” Ornek (2008) points out phenomenography’s focus is the personal experiences of the participants of the phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself while Johnston, Partridge and Hughes (2014) state phenomenography seeks the “how” rather than “what” regarding a phenomenon, such as how beginning administrators experience leadership coaching. Marton and Booth (1997) postulate the focus of phenomenography is on the experiences of the participants, “not to find the singular essence, but the variation and the architecture of this variation by different aspects that define the phenomena” (p. 117).

Marton (1981) makes a point to describe the world in two ways: “From the first-order perspective we aim at describing various aspects of the world and from the second-order

perspective we aim at describing people's experience of various aspects of the world" (p. 177). Phenomenography is dedicated to examining the world from the second-order perspective; specifically, through the experiences of those who are experiencing a specific phenomenon (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Assarroudi & Heydari, 2016). One can think of phenomenography as an attempt to define a phenomenon using only participants' perceptions. "Phenomenography can be described as a jigsaw puzzle and different people's experiences as its different parts; thus, these parts together can present a complete image of the phenomenon" (Assarroudi & Heydari, 2016, p. 218).

Since the purpose of a phenomenographic study is focused on the personal experiences of the participants to the phenomenon in question—how the participants conceptualize and understand the world around them in relation to the phenomenon—the use of the methodology is well suited to gain a better understanding of professional development strategies for educators (Akerlind, 2005; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Forster, 2016; Ogeyik, 2016; Trigwell, 2000). The aim is to understand the perception of the participants rather than focus merely on the phenomenon itself. As Cibangu and Hepworth (2016) state, "the focus of phenomenography is on people's varying conceptions of a given phenomenon, not on the phenomenon itself" (p. 152). Therefore, the types of studies appropriate for a phenomenographic study are ones in which the research strives to understand the meaning, consciousness, and various ways participants experience a specific phenomenon (Akerlind, 2005; Ogeyik, 2016; Trigwell, 2000); in this case, the use of executive leadership coaching for assistant principals.

Phenomenographic studies are routinely based on individual semi-structured interviews of participants with direct experience regarding a specific phenomenon (Bowden, 2005; Forster, 2013; Randles, 2012; Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002; Ornek, 2008). The participant interviews are

transcribed and analyzed for relational similarities and variations among the participants' viewpoints regarding the phenomenon (Bowden, 2005). The similarities and variations within the participants' experiences revealed through the analysis are placed into categories of description (Reed, 2006). Categories derived from analysis of the transcribed evidence of the interviews are used to describe the participants' experience with the phenomenon (Barnacle, 2005; Bowden, 2005). Marton and Booth (1996) emphasize each category must meet three principles: each must be logically associated, must completely describe the variation in the participants' experience, and must be qualitatively dissimilar from the other categories.

Researchers must strive to control their own biases through what Marton (1981) referred to as bracketing of the data. The bracketing of the data is the careful, intentionality of the researcher to be aware of and considerate of presumptions by the researcher regarding the phenomena. The researcher must set aside his own preconceptions of the phenomena and focus only on the viewpoints of the participants (Akerlind, 2005; Foster, 2016; Ornek, 2008). Lived experiences of the participant must be held to be true without the researcher attempting to justify the perception of the participant (Forster, 2016; Ornek, 2008; Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002). The goal is to report on the parallels and alterations participants view rather than supporting the researcher's presumptions of the phenomena (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Ornek, 2008).

Ashworth and Lucas (2000) suggest two imperative issues: "the need to bracket presuppositions (in particular, setting aside initially the objective of producing categories of description and presuppositions about the precise 'thing' being studied), and to develop empathy" (p. 299).

Empathy stems from the detachment of the researcher from his preconceptions in order to allow admittance into the lived experience through the participants' descriptions (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000).

Qualitative studies utilizing phenomenography can be messy according to Randles (2012) due to the close relationship between the researcher and the participants and/or the phenomenon itself. The reliance on the use of bracketing by the researcher to remove personal biases can be difficult, time-consuming, and frustrating (Bowden, 2005). As Cibangu and Hepworth (2016) state the advantage of phenomenographic research is using participants' perceptions to understand a phenomenon from various viewpoints. Larsson and Holmström (2007) explain phenomenography is concerned with "what" and "how," specifically "what" the participant is focused on and "how" the participant assigns meaning to the phenomenon. Through the use of phenomenographic research the aim is to recognize concepts by the participants to advance coaching strategies specifically for beginning building-level administrators. Then, "phenomenographic outcomes can be utilized beyond the research itself for the development of evidence-based tools, services, communication and interventions" (Johnston & Salaz, 2017, p. 2).

### **Similarities and Distinctions between Phenomenography and Phenomenology**

Modern phenomenology comes from the philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Lancy, 1993). Randles (2012) states phenomenology has a "goal of describing the 'essences' of the phenomenon that contribute to an understanding of meaning" (p. 11) from participant perspectives collectively. Therefore, one can differentiate between the two methodologies as phenomenography seeks to describe the collective experiences of participants also known as second-order perspective whereas the emphasis in phenomenology is on the phenomenon itself or first-order perspective (Akerlind, 2005; Assarroudi & Heydari, 2016; Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016; Finlay, 2009; Ogeyik, 2016; Ornek, 2008; Randles, 2012; Richardson, 1999). Phenomenology seeks to find a singular essence to a phenomenon whereas phenomenography

seeks to describe the similarities and the differences in collective experiences (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016; Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Ornek, 2008). Phenomenology is focused on a dualistic ontology where the object and the subject are autonomous of each other and detached whereas phenomenography has a non-dualistic ontology in that the object and the subject are reliant on each other (Cibangu & Hepworth, 2016; Ornek, 2008). In easier terms, phenomenology strives to describe a phenomenon as a whole through combined participant perceptions presented singularly and focused on the phenomenon; however, phenomenography strives to describe the variations of participant perspectives regarding phenomena to analyze those different viewpoints. Therefore, through the use of phenomenographic research a deeper understanding of participant perspectives can be used to support the use of professional development such as leadership coaching and optimistically assist in strengthening and cultivating such professional growth.

### **Existing Studies that Use Phenomenography Methodology**

Research pertaining to the phenomenographic study of executive coaching for educational leaders is lacking. A doctoral thesis published in 2013 applying phenomenography in an educational leadership study examined the use of school mission statements in Sweden with the main focus of the study centering on the perceptions of school leaders on shared ideas and beliefs within a school system (Thelin, 2013). Another recent study on the perception of school principals of their power within a school and the community utilized phenomenography; however, the study was lacking an executive coaching component (Ozaslan, 2017). Other search terms through online research such as *school leadership*, *school leaders*, *education leaders*, *school principal*, and *assistant principal* along with *phenomenography* did not produce a single

result through an advanced search of multiple databases including EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, and ProQuest.

Due to the lack of phenomenographic studies regarding educational leadership and the use of executive coaching, this study relied on previous research conducted in other disciplines. Previous studies referenced include Muhlise Ogeyik's (2016) study on the effect of personal learning experience on student teachers and their pedagogy experiences in the field. While Ogeyik's study was not centered on educational leadership or executive coaching, the use of phenomenography on participant experiences in an educational setting and the details provided regarding the use of participant interviews, data analysis, and reported findings from a phenomenographic study were useful. Marc Forster's (2016) study of information literacy also lacked an educational leadership and executive coaching component; however, the use of phenomenography in an educational setting along with rich descriptions of the data collection and data analysis within phenomenography were helpful. Bjorn Sjostrom's and Lars Dahlgren's (2002) use of phenomenography in nursing research also provided a specific process for the use of interviews in phenomenography along with an overview of the differences between phenomenology and phenomenography. As with the other studies, the detailed descriptions of phenomenographic data collection and analysis were useful in the designing of this study. Finally, Ozaslan's (2017) study of principal perception of power does include the use of phenomenography in an educational leadership setting, yet the executive coaching piece is still missing. Ozaslan's study, however, provided details for the consideration of ethical questions in phenomenography in addition to through descriptions of phenomenographic findings and conclusions.

## **Research Question**

This phenomenography study addressed one research question:

What are the lived experiences of newly appointed assistant principals who receive executive coaching through a leadership academy?

## **Research Design**

### **Worldview and Research Tradition**

A social constructivism worldview is used in this study as a basis for creating understanding through the experiences of others over various situations, discussions, and interactions (Creswell, 2013). Constructivism holds that reality and knowledge is “constructed” through experiences and understanding of others (Maston, 2008). Stake (2010) suggests there is no true, universal meaning regarding an event, thing, or phenomena; rather individuals use their previous knowledge and experience to form unique perceptions. Social constructivism suggests interview questions for participants should be wide-ranging and broad-spectrum to allow participants to explore their perceptions as they construct their individual meaning of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

Following a constructivism worldview the use of phenomenography as a methodology is natural as the methodology seeks to understand the various ways in which individuals experience a specific phenomenon (Johnston & Salaz, 2017). Marton (1986) stated that phenomenography purposes to describe the world as people “perceive and experience things” (p. 33). The use of phenomenography in educational research may help to describe the experiences of participants in relation to a phenomenon and thereby assist educators and others in creating more effective delivery methods (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Ornek, 2008) which is consistent with a constructivist worldview.

## **Subjectivity Statement**

The researcher has over twenty years of experience in public education starting in the 1990's teaching in a magnet middle school 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies. He moved into school administration with Orange County Public Schools, Florida in 2004 and moved with his family outside Atlanta, Georgia in 2007. In 2010 the researcher participated in the same learning academy (Superintendent's Leadership Academy, SLA) as the participants of this study both as a teacher leader (SLA I) and as an assistant principal (SLAII) in 2011. Currently, the researcher is an assistant principal in the same district as the study was conducted.

In 2015 the researcher and four of his colleagues became certified leadership coaches through the Kennesaw State University, Department of Educational Leadership endorsement program. The leadership coaching endorsement has been approved by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and is listed on the researchers' current Georgia Teaching and Leadership Certification. Since receiving certification in leadership coaching the researcher has coached teacher leaders for his current school district as well as for Kennesaw State University students seeking Master's and Specialist's degrees in Educational Leadership.

## **Participants**

Homogenous purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was employed as the selection of participants was based on similarities in their current endeavors, lack of experience regarding executive leadership coaching, and the location of the study. Newly appointed assistant principals outside of a large metro region in the Southeast were used in the study. The participants came from a pool of 18 recently appointed assistant principals; all of the participants experienced their first year of administration during the 2017-2018 academic year. All of the newly appointed assistant principals hired for the 2017-2018 academic year were invited to



participate in the study, however, only 13 agreed to participate. The age group of the participants ranged from 28-54 with mostly female (10) over male (3) participants. Bowden (2005) describes a phenomenographic study as having as few as 10 participants with a maximum of 30; however, for the purpose of this study 13 participants choose to participate.

The assistant principals in the study had experience in a series of ongoing support groups from within their school district through the use of a specific professional development initiative designed by the district for aspiring leaders; the series of professional development seminars was referred to as the Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA). The school district has established multiple SLAs for various levels of transition into higher levels of leadership; SLA I is for teachers who intend to move into building-level administration, SLA II is for new assistant principals, SLA III is for assistant principals who intend to move into a principalship, and SLA IV is for new principals. The professional development model created by the school district (SLA II) includes regular group meetings between the assistant principals and various district leaders to provide the participants an opportunity to meet and understand the roles of those district leaders. Those meetings take place once a month during a school year and include outside assignments relating to various administrative duties which culminate in a capstone project for each participant.

As part of the school district's professional development program, SLA II, each participant was assigned an individual leadership coach who followed the same professional development model for coaching. The coaching model employed by all leadership coaches in the study were trained and certified through the Kennesaw State University leadership coaching endorsement program and recognized by the Professional Standards Commission of Georgia. The coaching model was based on Elena Aguilar's *The Art of Coaching* (2013) and Whitmore's

(2009) GROW model. Aguilar (2013) focuses on a transformational coaching strategy in which the participants become self-aware of obstacles hindering professional growth, thereby willing to make necessary, positive, changes for increased leadership capacity. Whitmore's (2009) model incorporates an acronym to help the coach and participant focus on specific steps to attain progress:

(G) for setting a specific goal to work through;

(R) for reviewing the reality of the situation from multiple viewpoints;

(O) for developing and realizing options for the participant in relation to attaining the goal; and

(W) for agreement on when the action steps established by the coaching team will be executed then reviewed afterwards (Whitmore, 2009).

Both Aguilar's and Whitmore's coaching strategies incorporate similar techniques such as deep and poignant questioning, goal setting, and the establishment of a strong coach/coachee bond (Aguilar, 2013; Whitmore, 2009). However, due to the nature of coaching and the varied issues faced by the individual participants, the use of a scripted coaching model was not possible as each coaching session was unique to the needs of the participant.

Aguilar (2013) also advocates for the use of SMART goals which are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-explicit (SMART). As the client reflects on and develops their own goals the use of SMART allows the client and coach to set a realistic time frame to measure goal attainment or progress. SMART goals are a staple strategy within leadership coaching (Aguilar, 2013) and were included in the repertoire of all study leadership coaches.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted through pre-arranged interviews with the newly appointed assistant principals (see Appendix A). Bowden (2005) suggests interviewing of subjects as the preferred method of data collection within a phenomenographic study. Consistent with phenomenographic research the interview questions were intentionally left vague; the goal was to allow participants to explore their own feelings and experiences (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Khan, 2014). Use of open-ended questions was intended to allow the participants to fully describe their perceptions of their experience with the phenomenon (Bowden, 2005; Forster, 2013; Khan, 2014; Marton, 1986; Richardson, 1999). Essential to phenomenography are the variations in the perceptions of the participants' experiences through the interviewing process (Bowden, 2005; Richardson, 1999). Cherry (2005) points out that questions within a phenomenographic study should concentrate on "why" questions rather than "what" questions, in that the purpose of the interviews are to gather data on the lived experiences of the participants. Ashworth and Lucas (2000) suggest thorough consideration of opening remarks during the interviews along with carefully worded follow-up questioning to refrain from additional input from the researcher, other than probing questions, in order to minimize interviewer influence on the subject's perceptions of the phenomenon; the aim is to gain the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon rather than the researcher's. Bowden (2005) describes the possible influence of interviewer perceptions through the use of common conversational interaction in which both parties share their feelings on a subject; in this case, the interviewer must take precautions to maintain impartiality during the interview and only add to the conversation to probe for deeper understanding of the subject's perceptions. Akerlind (2005) cautions those new to phenomenography to refrain from adding new "ideas" to the participants' discussion "that have

not previously been introduced by the interviewee” (p. 80); this is in contrast to other methodologies which also use interviewing as a data collection strategy.

Following Green’s (2005) suggestions, interviews were planned for 45-60 minutes with a few taking up to 90 minutes. All study interviews were conducted by the researcher, recorded on a handheld audio recorder, and transcribed through Rev.com. During the interviews participants were asked to explain their experiences in regards to leadership coaching. Interviews were arranged at a time and place of the participants’ choosing. These actions were taken to address concerns for “the distribution of power in qualitative research” (p. 69) which Richardson (1999) discussed relating to possible influences from those within a position of authority during the data collection phase. In all, four coaches were used in the study; the researcher and three colleagues. All of the coaches, including the researcher, were Kennesaw State University (KSU) doctoral students as well as current school administrators in Georgia. All four coaches received training through KSU on executive leadership coaching and are certified by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission as Executive Leadership Coaches. The emphasis on the use of the four KSU trained leadership coaches was to warrant similar expectations and outcomes based on similar coaching and growth models utilized during the coaching sessions as well as analogous interviewing techniques for the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the interview data is critical to the phenomenographic process (Khan, 2014; Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton, 1986; Reed, 2006) and is intended to be clear to the reader for accountability regarding the analysis process (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). The goal of data analysis in phenomenography is to extricate the participants’ qualitatively different perceptions of their experiences into coding categories (Khan, 2014; Larsson & Holmström, 2007; Marton,

1986). These categories naturally become more specific and complex as the researcher strives to explain and codify the participants' experiences (Akerlind, 2005; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Forster, 2013; Reed, 2006). Larsson and Holmström (2007) assert that phenomenographic research seeks to understand how participants describe the phenomenon and what is discussed during their descriptions of the phenomenon during the interview process.

Sjostrom and Dahlgren (2002) proposed a seven-step process of data analysis within phenomenographic studies, the first of which is familiarization of the interview transcripts by thorough reading of each interview to get an overview of the material. The second step involves noting the more significant notations, otherwise known as codes, with the interviews. The third step is what Sjostrom and Dahlgren (2002) call condensation, which is the compression of longer passages to find central meaning (axial coding), while the fourth is the grouping and classification of common responses (repeated axial coding). The fifth step is continued reduction and comparison of categories, while the sixth is the continued compiling of categories with additional reduction; and finally, the seventh step is the description of the categories with a focus on the meaning of each and their importance—the development of themes (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002).

Data analysis did not begin until the interviews were completed so as to reduce the possibility of researcher bias from the data interfering with the remaining interviews (Bowden, 2005). The goal of data analysis in phenomenographic research is to “focus on describing key aspects of collective experiences, not the richness of individual experience” (Akerlind, 2005, p. 78) of the participants. Ornek (2008) asserts data analysis should search for differences as well as similarities between the participants and their experiences.

Participant interviews were transcribed and uploaded within NVivo software to assist with data analysis. The interview transcripts were broken down into codes which allowed for the experiences of the participants to be examined as a whole rather than individually (Akerlind, 2005; Bowden, 2005). As pointed out by Faherty (2010, p. 59) qualitative coding overall does not include “absolute hard-and-fast rules” regarding the process of data coding. Blair (2015) suggests the use of emergent or open coding as a process of creating codes from the individual transcripts without the use of predetermined or priori coding (searching for keywords and phrases regarding professional development and coaching). The codes within this study represent emotions and perceptions across subjects dealing with school and professional growth as well as personal and professional obstacles discussed during the leadership coaching sessions.

Marton (1994) cautioned researchers during the data analysis phase to bracket their preconceived positions of what the data will reveal during the initial phase of analysis. A researcher must maintain an open mind and strive to collect and analyze the data through what Ashton and Lucas (2000) refer to as empathy for the participants’ world and their experiences. As stated before, intentional identification and control of a researcher’s own bias regarding a phenomenon is required through the bracketing of the data (Marton, 1981). Bracketing, according to Marton (1981), is the cautiousness of the researcher to consider his own presumptions pertaining to the phenomenon. The viewpoints of the participants and not the preconceptions of the researcher are the goal in a phenomenographic study (Akerlind, 2005; Foster, 2016; Ornek, 2008). Lived experiences of the participant must be held to be true without the researcher attempting to justify the perception of the participant (Forster, 2016; Ornek, 2008; Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002). Here again, the goal was to report on the parallels and differing participant views rather than supporting the researcher’s presumptions of the phenomena

(Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Ornek, 2008). However, Blair (2015) points out that bracketing during data analysis may be futile as in the case of this study the researcher was present during the interviews, transcribed the data personally, and conducted the data analysis; therefore, maintaining an objective viewpoint was quite difficult.

### **Timeline**

The group of newly appointed assistant principals in the sample received executive coaching as part of their professional learning through the district's Superintendents Leadership Academy (SLA) starting in January 2018. Throughout June and July of 2018 the participants were interviewed leading to data analysis of those interviews taking place during July through August 2018.

### **Confidentiality and Trustworthiness**

Guba (1981) proposed four tenets for the establishment of trustworthiness in qualitative studies in the form of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility, or "truth value" (Guba, 1981), is the perception of participants through the use of member checks. The researcher strived to build a rapport with the participants in an effort to put them at ease so they could provide honest and frank reactions during the interviews. Member checking during the interview process included summarizing and restating participants' responses to ensure accuracy of the data collection.

Transferability, according to Guba (1981), is accomplished through the thick description of the phenomena, participants, interview protocols, and data analysis coding. The descriptions within the study have the intent to provide thorough detail of the participants, how they were interviewed, their perceptions, and how the transcribed data were analyzed. In the end the process was intended to be transparent and easy to follow for the reader and future researchers.

To this end, the researcher also used interview notes, coding notes, and research notes throughout the dissertation process to reflect on the various processes used in the study with the goal to strengthen those procedures.

Dependability (Guba, 1981) is accomplished through the constructivist worldview in that multiple meanings are possible across multiple studies. Guba (1981) explains differences in data over time can be attributed to different situations, scenarios, and changes in participants' insights and reality shifts. The establishment of dependability between interviews required close re-examination of the thick descriptions of phenomena, participants, interview protocols, and data analysis coding among the various interviews.

Confirmability stated by Guba (1981) is met through the researchers' steps to remove personal biases and to impart a neutral stance throughout the study. The use of Deviant Case Analysis (Mauceri, 2013) was utilized to search for outliers in the research—portions of the transcripts which did not line up with the comparative norm of the participants. The analysis of these exceptions within the transcripts was scrutinized in an effort to control for the bias of the researcher (Mauceri, 2013). Searching for data points that differed or contradicted the norms within the transcripts provided additional insight into the phenomenon studied. Other established phenomenographic steps regarding brackets were used such as researcher reflection notes, as well as searching for commonalities, variances, and revelations in the data (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000).

## **Ethics**

Studies have the potential to impact participants, which requires researchers to be cognizant and vigilant to avert or mitigate risks (Kjellstrom, Ross, & Fridlund, 2010). To that end, the ethical considerations for this study intended to provide a benefit, do no harm/minimize



the risk of harm to the participants, provide participants with an informed consent with the opportunity to withdraw from the study, and refrain from the use of deceptive practice. Through this study the experiences expressed by the participants can be used to develop influential professional development for assistant principals through a coaching component. Participation in the study posed no risk or at least was minimized through the before-mentioned strategies used for confidentiality for the participants. As per Kennesaw State University requirements through the Internal Review Board (IRB) process, informed consent was acquired in the form of a cover letter to provide detailed explanations of the goals of the research; how the data would be collected, analyzed, and reported; as well as how confidentiality would be maintained (see Appendix B). The consent cover letter also provided participants information pertaining to opting out or withdrawing from the research and was used in place of a signed consent form in an effort to maintain participant confidentiality as per Kennesaw State University IRB guidelines.

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training was completed in accordance with Kennesaw State University (KSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements. The courses through CITI were intended to provide researchers with an understanding to conduct ethical research to meet international standards on multiple topics such as informed consent, conflict of interest, social and behavior research, and minimal risk research. Likewise, following KSU requirements an IRB was submitted to the university as well as to the school district from which the newly appointed assistant principals work (see Appendix C and D). Both the KSU and school district IRB processes included applications with detailed explanations of the study; the participants; and how data was collected, used, safeguarded, and

maintained. The use of an informed consent cover letter detailing voluntary participation in the study, details of the study, and the rights of participants was utilized (See Appendix B).

Confidentiality of participants was accomplished through the use of randomly assigned participant numbers in which only the researcher had access to the data being collected. All data was stored on an external hard drive and a personal audio recorder, both of which were locked in the researcher's home office. All electronic data collected during the study was destroyed within 60 days of the completion of the project. Data from the study will be kept in a secure location for 5-10 years then destroyed as per standard qualitative data collection and retention procedures. (Creswell, 2009).

The researcher had previous personal experience as a participant in the Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA) both as a teacher (SLA I, in 2010) and as a new assistant principal (SLA II, in 2011). The researcher was also one of the four leadership coaches in the study and coached 4 of the 13 participants during their coaching sessions. Additionally, the researcher interviewed all 13 participants in the study personally.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study was the use of newly appointed assistant principals from a single school district north of metro Atlanta; due to cultural norms and the sample size of the participants, replicability of the study in other school districts in the United States and elsewhere should be examined. Future studies should include provisions for a more diverse population of participants from other geographical locations.

Due to their recent appointment as building-level leaders the participants may have been hesitant to provide information that could be seen as a negative for this or any professional development opportunity for which they were provided. Previously discussed steps that ensured

confidentiality and protection of the participant data have been listed; however, the participants knew and previously worked with the researcher and the other coaches; therefore, concerns for participant openness were still present. During the coaching process as well as during the interviews, participants were regularly reminded of the confidentiality of both practices. Information discussed during the coaching sessions was not recorded via audio or visual means, as per coaching norms. Another coaching norm was the prohibition of discussing coaching session information with coachee supervisors or employers; therefore, the school district did not receive information regarding the discussions during coaching sessions other than dates and times.

The intent of this phenomenological study was to analyze the lived experiences of assistant principals who received executive coaching as part of their professional learning as new school administrators. Phenomenography was chosen to discover variations in the participants viewpoints regarding their experiences with leadership coaching as part of a larger professional learning academy. Chapter four will discuss the analysis of the participants' viewpoints from the study while chapter five will expound on the findings from the data analysis as well as discussion of the study limitations and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

The lack of research regarding the use of executive leadership coaching as a support mechanism for beginning school administrators was the impetus for this study. Previous research has shown the potential of leadership coaching to increase capacity for non-educators (Farver & Holt, 2015; Gyllensten & Palmar, 2014; Hanssmann, 2014; Sonesh et al., 2015; Weinberg, 2016) while other research has justified specific professional learning opportunities for assistant principals to increase their leadership capacity (Bastian & Henry, 2015; Boerema, 2011; Bush, 2009; Lochmiller, 2013). This study was intended to add to the conversation regarding leadership coaching, the need for specific professional learning for assistant principals, and the effectiveness of the two components combined for increased new school administrator leadership capacity.

This chapter provides data analysis from 13 interviews of newly appointed assistant principals from a suburban, mid-sized school district outside a large metropolitan city in the southeastern United States. A summary of the participants is provided to shed light on their backgrounds, levels of experience, and current administrative assignments. The chapter then provides in-depth exploration of the four main themes and 10 sub-themes which were identified during the data analysis. Two overarching themes of *leadership coaching for learning* and *leadership coaching for support* were similar with the participant viewpoints of the leadership academy resulting in Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA) for learning and SLA for support.

## **Summary of Participants**

Data for this study was gathered from 13 participants as described in Chapter 3. The newly appointed assistant principals in the study had no previous experience with leadership coaching and were new to the role of school administration. Interviews for the study were based on an open-ended Interview Protocol (See Appendix A) and began with collecting limited demographic information (See Table 1). Participants included 10 females and three males with age ranges of 30-49. While all of the participants were new to the role of assistant principal, their careers in education varied from eight to 26 years of experience; most had been in the education field between 11 and 15 years. The participants were assigned schools throughout the district which varied in socio-economics, academic achievement, and ethnicity. One assistant principal was assigned to a middle school, five to high schools, and seven to elementary schools. All of the participants had previous experience with different levels of students and schools (elementary, middle and high school); however, none were assistant principals prior to the study.

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Study Participants*

		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	3	23%
	Female	10	77%
Age	30-36	4	31%
	36-42	4	31%
	43-49	5	38%
Race/Ethnicity	Black or African American	1	8%
	Non-Hispanic Caucasian	12	92%
School Demographic	Free & Reduced Lunch 11-20%	1	8%
	Free & Reduced Lunch 21-30%	5	38%
	Free & Reduced Lunch 31-40%	6	46%
	Free & Reduced Lunch >41%	1	8%
School Level	Elementary	7	54%
	Middle	1	8%
	High	5	38%
Years of Experience in Education	8-10	3	23%
	11-15	5	38%
	16-20	4	31%
	21+	1	8%

The following is a short narrative of the participants detailing their work experience, a brief description of where they grew up, and their current leadership positions. This information was gathered during the interview process. As per research guidelines as well as approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) criteria, each participant is assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

Adele is a female from the northeastern United States who moved to Georgia a few years ago. She is in her late 40s and has worked at the middle school level but is now assigned to an elementary school which has seen many changes to school leadership over the past five years.

Although she has over 10 years of experience in education, she is excited but nervous at the same time due to being a new assistant principal.

Barbara is a woman from Georgia who grew up in a small town. She is in her mid-40s and has taught at the middle school level but is now assigned to a high school. With over 20 years in the profession, she is surprised by the amount of discipline she deals with daily at the high school level.

Christina is a female from New England who moved to Georgia several years ago. She has taught multiple grades both in middle and high schools and is now assigned to an elementary school. She is in her early 30s and is overwhelmed by the numbers of unforeseen issues that pop up on a daily basis. She has less than 10 years of experience in the profession.

Debra is a woman from the Midwestern United States who moved to Georgia several years ago. After teaching in middle school for two years the rest of her career has been at the high school level. She is a consensus builder and enjoys making connections with her students, teachers, parents, and colleagues. She has more than 15 years in the profession.

Elise is a female who was raised the same district in which she works. She attended the same school as a student at which she is now an assistant principal. Elise is a self-described perfectionist and strives to make everything work in an orderly fashion although she admits this new role is very challenging. She has less than 10 years of experience in the profession.

Frieda is a woman who also grew up in the same county in which she currently works; however, she did not attend her current school as a student. She is in her mid-40s and has strong roots in the district and enjoys the challenges of working in a high school. One of her greatest strengths is making connections with others during her 10+ years of experience.

Alvin is a male who grew up in a neighboring county in Georgia. He is in his mid-30's and has worked most of his career at the high school level. His former life as a coach provided him the opportunity to be an athletic director at a high school, which has been a challenge juggling those responsibilities with other assistant principal roles. He has over 10 years of experience in education. His school's administrative team is completely new both to the location and to their roles.

Gianna is a female who grew up in the same district and has previous experience as a special education teacher and facilitator. She is passionate about working with students with disabilities and thoroughly enjoys her assignment in an elementary school. She has less than 10 years of experience. Her school has experienced a unique change in location as well as an entirely new administrative team over the last two years.

Heather is a female who grew up in the southern United States and moved to Georgia a few years ago. She enjoys the challenges of an elementary school but was surprised by all of the unknown duties and responsibilities of the position. She has less than 10 years of experience in the profession.

Bruce is a man who grew up in the northeastern United States; however, his entire teaching career has been in the same district in Georgia. After a brief stint at the middle school level, he is back to the original high school where he taught for many years, this time as an assistant principal. He is struggling to define the line between a colleague and an evaluator with friends he has worked with as a teacher and has over 10 years of experience in the profession. The school has had the entire administrative staff change over the last three years.



Ingrid is a woman in her late 40s who grew up in South Georgia and enjoys her assignment to an elementary school. She has learned to work with many people to build consensus for school goals through her 15+ years in the education profession.

Julie is a female in her mid-40s who grew up in the same county as she now works. While she did not attend the same school to which she is assigned, she does have some of the same teachers on her staff that taught her as a student. Her 10+ years of experience as a special education teacher has prepared her to work with others to set goals for student achievement.

Karina is a woman in her late 40s who grew up in a neighboring county in Georgia. She has extensive experience at all levels of teaching and is now assigned to a high school. She has a passion for working with students but also feels overwhelmed by all of the other duties and responsibilities of school administration. She has more than 10 years of experience in the profession.

### **Emerging Themes**

Analysis of the study participants' experiences in receiving executive leadership coaching services through a leadership academy revealed four main themes; two of which specifically related to leadership coaching, and two themes in reference to their experiences with the leadership academy itself (see Figure 2). The themes developed regarding leadership coaching were: Coaching for Learning and Coaching for Support. The participants' experiences within Coaching for Learning discussed the use of leadership coaching to improve their knowledge and practice of the new role of assistant principal, while within the theme of Coaching for Support participants discussed how they perceived leadership coaching as a helpful mechanism for handling the transition to a building-level school administrator. Likewise, the participant experiences with the Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA), from which leadership

coaching was provided, developed into two main themes mainly dealing with networking: Networking for Learning and Networking for Support. While similar participant sentiments existed among their experiences and perceived benefits between leadership coaching and networking opportunities within the leadership academy, the variations of those viewpoints are presented in these findings. Many times the participants' viewpoints can be interpreted in multiple contexts; therefore, the same participant quotes appear in multiple themes.

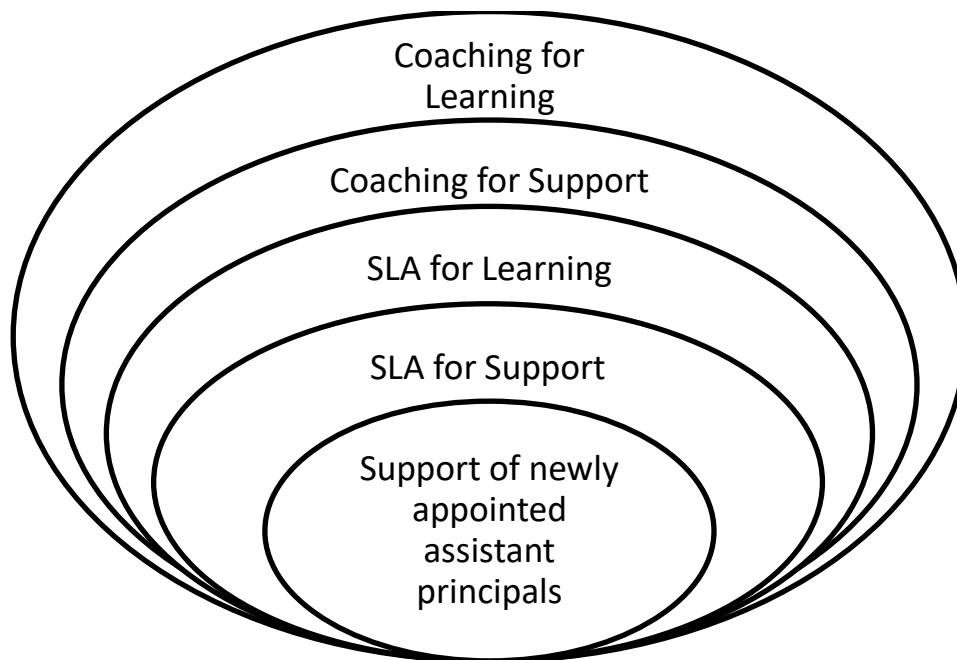


Figure 2: Presentation of Themes

**Theme: Coaching for learning.** Analysis of participant responses regarding their experience with Leadership Coaching developed into two main themes: Coaching for Learning and Coaching for Support. Within the realm of Coaching for Learning the participants discussed their views of the skills and strategies gained from their coaching sessions which aided in their performance of their new roles as school administrators. Participants regularly expressed the steep learning curve of becoming a new school administrator and how their coach aided in that

learning process. Study participants also consistently discussed the increased development of their leadership capacity through analysis of new experiences in school administration with their coach, as expounded by Christina, who said, “We talked through scenarios which was really helpful, it helped me to learn how to deal with those situations.” Those experiences which comprise the main theme of Coaching for Learning are dissected into subthemes of Reflective Practice and Goal Setting, Self-Efficacy, and Learning from an Experienced Coach.

***Sub-theme: Reflective practice and goal setting.*** To help clients in leadership roles handle the stress of multiple duties and responsibilities, leadership coaches routinely utilize reflective practices and goal setting as techniques to assist clients in prioritizing their personal and organizational goals (Aguilar, 2013; Weinberg, 2016). The variations from this study of participants’ viewpoints regarding reflective practice as well as goal setting is combined as a singular subtheme following the tenets of leadership coaching where a coach uses the client’s reflective observations as stepping stones towards the creation of action plans to reach client-created goals (Farver & Holt, 2015; Gyllensten & Palmar, 2014; Hanssmann, 2014; Sonesh et al., 2015). Frequently, participants referenced the reflective practice and goal setting they learned from leadership coaching as having a positive impact on their performance; participant Gianna said, “Having a coach really just helps you weed through the multiple responsibilities that an administrator has and really to plan things out and put things into action.” Adele delved deeper and described her use of reflective practice via leadership coaching as,

[It] made it easy for me to get into my own head and be reflective about what it was I was saying. A lot of the stuff I probably could have figured out on my own eventually, but some stuff I really didn't know the answers to until [the coach] kind of dug a little deeper and made me think in a different way...it allowed me to set goals and create action plans.

Gianna went further and described her use of reflective practice via leadership coaching as follows: “Education is largely being practitioners, taking what happens and internalizing that feedback and figuring out how we personally get better. Those times that we [the coach] met together were good for that.”

Typical for anyone who begins a new role at work, there are unforeseen challenges and stressors for which the newly appointed assistant principals in the study were not well prepared to handle. Debra stated, “It’s a vertical learning curve,” in reference to understanding her new position as a high school administrator and its intricacies. Many participants stated they did not fully understand the plethora of duties and responsibilities an assistant principal is tasked to oversee. The onslaught of those new duties and responsibilities was referenced by many participants as intense and daunting and left them questioning their abilities. Adele noted, “Just the overwhelming amount of pieces that I had my hand in and the decision-making power that was given to me, I didn’t know that I was going to be making what I see are huge decisions.”

Mezirow (1997, p. 7) described transformative learning as “critical self-reflection” in which the participant of the experience creates his or her own meaning and perspective; many of the participants in this study described such reflection as a result of their coaching sessions. Debra explained, “Coaching made it easy for me to kind of get into my own head and be reflective about what it was I was saying.” Karina explored her coach’s strategy of leading her through the process of self-reflection and the positive results she experienced.

She was making me reflect on different things that I had done, bringing them out so that they weren’t like in the back of my mind as a passing moment but making me realize the importance of them, making me see that they were important and that I am making a difference.

The importance of including self-reflection strategies in the coaching sessions to assist clients in the development of those skills was highlighted by Frieda.

The time set aside to reflect, but the guidance and the prompting that brought about the reflection, I think that setting aside that time was very important. I would have never done that on my own nor would I have been able to prompt myself or walk myself through my own thought process, which is exactly what happened for me.

In addition to the self-reflective component of coaching was a repeating theme of goal setting. Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-explicit (SMART) goals are a staple strategy within leadership coaching (Aguilar, 2013). The use of the strategy helps clients to sort through the endless clutter of thoughts and emotions to focus intentionally on a particular goal, whether that goal is personal or organizational. Bruce described the goal-setting process as, “[The coach] kept steering it back to actions, steps, forward. Everything was forward movement. What's the next step? Where you going, what you doing, what you thinking? That really kept it goal-oriented.” The goal strategy process utilized by the leadership coaches in this study allowed participants to create action steps moving forward as stated by Julie: “I always ended up with some idea or some thought about what I needed to do next that wasn't even in my head when we started the conversation.” Gianna further expounded, “...to accomplish and overcome difficulties in the position and get on the right track to create an action plan.” Goal creation by leadership coaches provided study participants with their next move toward their self-created goals which were discussed and revised during follow-up coaching sessions.

***Sub-theme: Self-efficacy.*** The American Psychological Association defines self-efficacy as “an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments” (“Self-Efficacy,” n.d., para. 1). Aguilar (2013) emphasizes a

critical component of leadership coaching is the development of self-reflective mechanisms to enable the client to be self-aware of individual belief systems and capabilities. After self-realization of the client has taken place, transformational learning can begin, which will increase self-efficacy in that leader (Aguilar, 2013). One of the goals for transformational learning through leadership coaching is the development of productive, reflective thinking to change the client's paradigm into viewing difficulties from a positive stance of opportunity rather than a hazard and thereby increasing their self-efficacy (Cerni et al., 2010). Unlike the use of a mentor, leadership coaching is focused on transformational change taking place within the client rather than forced by someone else (Sonesh et al., 2015). The following statements by participants showcase their increase in self-efficacy via leadership coaching and how their coach skillfully affected that positive change within the participants.

Study participants regularly discussed the use of leadership coaching to assist in their self-improvement for self-efficacy as stated by Ingrid, "The emphasis seems to be really helping that person find within them what they need to work on or what they want to work on." Heather commented how the use of the reflective practice allowed her to analyze situations and plan for the future: "After a session I would reflect all the way home and it seemed like I was able to come back the next day even bigger and better." Other participants noted their increased self-efficacy and self-confidence through coaching as stated by Elise, "I think coaching in general, it has definitely helped validate some of my opinions and helped me build my skills." Similarly, Bruce stated, "...by letting me know that I was justified at not looking for the status quo. [The coach] reinforcing that, it just empowered me to act. It made me less of a coward and more of the okay; I'm going to do this." Ultimately, participants were in agreement that the use of leadership coaching increased their self-efficacy which thereby allowed them to be more successful as a

school leader; Karina stated, “I think as [the coach] worked with me, there were a couple of times when I was, ‘Yes, I am making a difference.’”

Increasing self-efficacy by influencing a client’s belief in his or her abilities can be challenging. Bruce described the sometimes difficult road to increasing self-efficacy through differing perspectives. “[The coach] asked me, often, to flip the script and asked me to view things from the opposing point of view. Doing that, not always comfortable, but that sort of thing is always beneficial.” Hanssmann (2014) asserts leadership coaching of school leaders can be transformational for the client, yet a fundamental modification to the client’s paradigm must take place to affect the capacity to grow. Overall, participants summed up their growth through leadership coaching as a positive, transformational journey, as also provided by Bruce, that “emboldened me to take a lot of steps that I wouldn't have taken otherwise, kept me goal-focused.”

The philosophy of leadership coaching is allowing transformational change to occur within the client rather than externally such as in the case of a mentorship (Sonesh et al., 2015). Coaching involves self-directed realization of learning and self-efficacy (Aguilar, 2013) whereas mentoring is usually directed by a more experienced and senior co-worker or evaluator in which the mentor decides for the client what is to be taught or learned (Cleary & Horsfall, 2015). Ingrid surmised her realization of leadership coaching versus mentoring as, “The emphasis seems to be...helping that person find within them what they need to work on or what they [themselves] want to work on.” Once participants were aware of what they needed or wanted to work on to increase their self-efficacy the leadership coach used that person’s skills and strategies to affect growth and change. The growth of the participants’ self-efficacy was routinely described as unexpected or surprising; Frieda summed up her growth experience as:

The prompting was more questions that brought about my ability to reflect which I really liked; it was a super unexpected surprise because I realize I was coming up with everything that was being discussed. I was figuring things out on my own, which was great.

A similar statement was provided by Heather in expressing her self-efficacy growth via leadership coaching rather than through the use of a mentor:

I think it's effective [coaching], and the biggest difference that I see is that I can go to a mentor and they can help me with the situation at the time. I can go to my coach; they're going to teach me strategies that help me deal with the situations when they're not there.

***Sub-theme: Learning from an experienced coach.*** During study interviews, participants were asked probing and follow-up questions regarding the attributes of their coaches to determine positive and negative coach qualities from the participants' viewpoints. Aguilar (2013) discussed in her book *The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation* the need for a leadership coach to have prior experience in school leadership as well as to understand the unique necessities for each individual client. It is paramount for the leadership coach to have the flexibility to employ coaching strategies depending on the needs of the individual administrator as determined by the client, the school, and the community (Lochmiller, 2013). Prior research concluded the use of experienced leadership coaches in the same field as the client is beneficial for goal setting and attainment (Farver & Holt, 2015). In this study none of the participants noted any negative attributes of their coaches; however, all participants responded positively, specifically about their coach's previous or current experience as school administrators. Repeatedly, participants commented on their coaches' hands-on involvement in school leadership, which led to a main theme in the study.



Participants revealed their yearning to learn from experienced administrators and their appreciation for their leadership coaches' prior or current expertise in building-level administration; as Julie stated, "I knew that she knew my job. She had done what I was doing. She knew this county. That helped," while Bruce added:

The fact that the guy has sat in the curriculum spot, he's been a coach, he worked in the building before they moved him up to principal. He and I shared so many similarities and he's just fundamentally a great guy.

Follow-up questions during the interviews asked participants to expound on their preference of having an experienced school leader as a leadership coach versus a leadership coach from another industry or without school leadership experience. Bruce stated, "Okay, this guy gets it. This guy understands, because not only has he been in the fire, he's probably in the middle of it right now." Elise summed up her response:

When I was talking about scheduling, I saw their [the coach's] face, they automatically know what I'm talking about. So, that's really, really beneficial, because again, it cuts down that stuff. It allows me to get to what I need to do, instead of maybe explaining to my other coach, well, here's how things happen here, and this, that, and the other.

Several participants commented on their viewpoint on the necessity for their coach to possess previous building-level experience as a school administrator. Heather said, "...talking with somebody about it that is in the field of education versus going home and talking to a spouse or a friend...you need to be around other people that are in the same kind of boat you are." The prior experience of the leadership coaches allowed for building trust between the coach and client through shared experiences which helped to establish a stronger bond. Those shared experiences between coaches and clients allowed participants to be open and delve deeper into

their specific needs as a beginning school administrators, as stated by Adele: “Having somebody who understands my situation really made me more comfortable in being open.”

The majority of leadership coaches utilized in this study were employees of the same school district as the participants, which led the researcher to initial concerns about whether or not coaches from within the same school district would help or hinder the coaching process; however, the majority of participants felt the familiarity with the school district was a positive attribute of their coach. Gianna surmised her experience as, “For me it was a positive that she was in the same district. For availability, the ease of meeting, that wasn’t going to be stressful.” Ingrid commented on her reluctance working with a coach from the same school district due to concerns of being judged:

You might limit certain conversations if you know someone's in a position above you. It doesn't mean you're not going to get anything out of it, but maybe if you're struggling with something, is there something that you're just not sure of, you might not bring that up.

However, the prevalent viewpoint of participants centered on their acceptance of working with leadership coaches from the same district as a positive aspect due to the coaches’ familiarity with the system as summed up by Karina.

I think knowing the district in which I work was helpful because [the coach] could provide some insight on things that I maybe experience in that maybe from a policy issue that’s here or how things work here. She was able to advise me within the structures that she knew existed so that whatever choices I'll be making or decisions I might be making, would be within those versus maybe somebody that wasn’t here, they could guide me and it may not be within [the school district].

**Theme: Coaching for support.** Participants also continually commented on their use of leadership coaching as a support mechanism for their transition into building-level administrators. Most participants commented on the steep learning curve as well as the stress that accompanies the new role of school administrator. Heather reflected on her transition into school leadership by saying, “I was really shocked. I knew there would be a big learning curve. I just was not expecting how big of a learning curve and how there wasn't a lot of support.” The need for personal and emotional support as a theme is a variation of perceptions of coaching as a professional learning tool, a variation that highlighted the need for personalized support. Christina stated, “It was nice also to have that one-on-one attention, to be honest, where someone was really sitting down and listening to me sort through my own day or my own issues that were going on.” While the perceptions listed in this theme continue to express the learning processes of the individual participants, the primary focus is on the emotional aspects of their growth as building-level administrators. In their responses the participants detailed their need for individualized attention in a confidential setting, with a non-judgmental coach, whereby their coaching sessions resulted in increased self-confidence as school administrators.

***Sub-theme: Individualized.*** Many participants discussed their previous experience with other professional development programs or professional learning opportunities as being ineffective for their personal, individualized needs. Previous research regarding professional development for new school leaders has been identified as lacking individualized goals and skills development relying rather on the one-size-fits-all mentality (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Enomoto, 2012; Gurley et al., 2015; Harvey, 1994; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Previous research regarding leadership coaching has indicated a priority for a coach is to identify the potential within a client, to build on the client’s abilities, and to push the client toward distinct goals (Hanssmann, 2014),

which many participants stated was valued in regards to their experiences within this study. Alvin commented on his appreciation for a personalized stance by his coach, saying, “Individualized, that being the biggest thing, way too often professional development it's very general. So anything that's personalized and something that the educator can take immediately and begin to use I think is good.” Christina added her preference for professional learning to include the needs of the specific locale of the professional as well as her individual needs: “I think it needs to be personalized and personalized to the district that you're working in, definitely.” Overall the preference by participants for individualization by their coach was summed up by Debra:

I think good professional development is personalization of learning and skills based on what I need as a leader, or as a person, or as a professional. So, in my experience, anything that has to do with what I'm doing, what I'm teaching, what my duties and responsibilities are, have been the best professional development experiences ever.

Repeatedly, the new assistant principals in the study discussed their need for individualized attention to support their specific necessities and how they perceived leadership coaching as meeting those needs. Those viewpoints by the participants corroborated previous research which suggests leadership coaching's value lies in the individualization based on the specific needs of the school leader (Farver & Holt, 2015). Elise commented on her perception of coaching as, “...it's geared towards me, helping me grow professionally,” while Frieda elaborated on her initial guilt for receiving such personalized services:

It was very positive, I almost felt guilty. Well I did feel a little guilty initially. Just that someone else was taking the time to give me their full attention, I got to schedule it, and I got to say where it was.

Continually, participants detailed the benefits of leadership coaching through a supportive lens, in which they could process overwhelming amounts of new experiences, challenges, and dilemmas in a supportive and nurturing environment which was specifically geared for the individual. Alvin described his personal, supportive experience as “truly beneficial in the fact that it gave me a moment, to sit down, talk to someone else, and not be told how to do it or what to do...it was time spent on just me.” The individualized, personal attention provided to Christina allowed for a greater depth of openness with her leadership coach,

I was surprised how much I opened up to her... It was nice also to have that one-on-one attention, where someone was really sitting down and listening to me sort through my own day or my own issues...Yeah, I feel like it was very helpful.

Here again, many participants noted the difference between mentoring and leadership coaching during their discussion of the individualization they received through leadership coaching. Repeatedly their perceptions defined experiences which augmented their self-efficacy through the leadership coaches’ focus on their individual personalized growth and needs rather than a mentorship scenario where actions are prescribed by a school or district. Julie explained her coach’s strategy for her self-efficacy: “She asked me questions that made me figure things out on my own without telling me.” Karina concluded the process and goal of self-efficacy through coaching as, “I realized that it was more about really making me think versus telling me how to think.”

***Sub-theme: Confidential.*** Obviously, new hires in any employment situation are hesitant to share information that may be construed as incompetency or lack of knowledge on their part; the pressure to prove themselves and make a positive impact on their schools is no different for newly appointed assistant principals. Due to the hesitancy to share potential shortcomings in

their abilities, it is imperative for a leadership coach to have no supervisory role in the evaluation of a client (Aguilar, 2017). One of the central components of executive leadership coaching is the establishment of a coach/client relationship built on trust and confidentiality in order to effect positive, transformational change in the client (Aguilar, 2013). Consistently, study participants described their viewpoints on the importance of confidentiality during their coaching sessions as a safe place outlet for their frustrations. Elise shared, "...then sometimes, you just need to vent. Your circle gets smaller and smaller, who you can vent to, and know that it's going to stay here." Adele stated her appreciation knowing her coach would remain confidential: "I can speak freely in here without worrying that it's going to end up on somebody's desk."

However, the formation of trust between the coach and client had to be intentional and skillfully planned by the coach. Farver and Holt (2003) found the implementation of intense, purposeful, and confidential listening to client needs has been touted as one of the powerful benefits of leadership coaching. Alvin described the process taken by his coach initially to build trust and establish confidentiality prior to the start of the coaching sessions.

I just think that the fact that the conversation we had prior to the coaching experience about how it was about me and that it was...Nobody else was going to have access to the information, we were the only ones who were privy to it. I was okay with that.

Participant Heather detailed her viewpoint on the establishment of confidentiality with her coach and the relief she felt from the realization information would remain between her and the coach. "Once we did a session or two and I realized, okay, she's for real, that it's just between us, that I can let my guard down a little bit, it was more beneficial."

Consistent with Aguilar's (2017) position supporting the use of an outside coach to support new administrators, participants, despite stating their dependence on their principals for

advice and guidance, also expressed their need for additional support in a confidential setting. Elise shared her need for a confidant in her coach as being “able to help me with a couple of problems that I didn't really think that I wanted to necessarily bring up to the other assistant principal and the principal.” Ingrid elucidated her need for confidentiality with a leadership coach outside of her building.

Having that outside sounding board, where I would have an opportunity to talk... I may not have felt it was safe to do inside my building, so a very safe space whether I was sharing good things or bad things, but it was a safe space to share that.

Gianna expounded on the topic of confidentiality established by her coach and her concerns for future possible repercussions from those conversations.

I think that because [the coach is] at a certain level of professionalism, I was able to trust that things would remain confidential. Anybody who's going to be a coach needs to be selected with purpose. I don't want to say anything or too much that would cloud anybody's judgment. I don't want to say anything that's going to bite me in the butt later down the line. Or say something that's inappropriate as far as being able to speak freely with another professional within the same district.

***Sub-theme: Non-judgmental.*** In the high-pressure world of school leadership the desire to make sound decisions that support both students and teachers remains difficult especially for beginning administrators. A variation of participant viewpoints on the need for coaching sessions to be confidential, participants also expressed their desire for the coach to be non-judgmental. The need for a non-judgmental coach has been implied by previous studies to be synonymous with client requirements for confidentiality (Aguilar, 2017; Cleary & Horsfall,

2015; Farver & Holt, 2015). Adele expressed her willingness to open up to her coach and discuss her feelings and viewpoints freely in a non-judgmental setting.

I was very comfortable with my coach. I felt very comfortable. I think for me being comfortable with somebody is key to being honest with what's happening. I didn't feel judged or criticized or being evaluated in what I was saying. It made me easy to be honest with what was going on. [The coach] made it easy for me to kind of get into my own head and be reflective about what it was I was saying.

Here again, some participants were uneasy sharing their feelings with peers or supervisors as Elise stated,

It's been great. I really enjoy talking to [the coach], because so often, we sometimes get caught up in what's been going on, so it is refreshing to take a break and have somebody to talk to outside of work, outside of your school. And for us, specifically, [the coach was] able to help me with a couple of problems that I didn't really think that I wanted to necessarily bring up to the other AP and the principal.

The reoccurring need of the participants for a positive, supporting resource to share their thoughts allowed them to open up more freely in their coaching sessions. Adele stated that her coach was “a good listener, didn't comment on anything that I said with judgment or criticism. It's easy just to talk freely, approachable.” Barbara shared, “I didn't feel judged or criticized or being evaluated in what I was saying. It made me easy to be honest with what was going on.” These viewpoints are consistent with previous research regarding the need to establish a trusting environment for the client within leadership coaching sessions (Farver & Holt, 2015; Hanssmann, 2014). Frieda summed up her perception of her growth in a non-judgmental setting.



I know that I shared things in the coaching sessions that I wouldn't have shared. I may have shared with a friend but I wouldn't have shared in the same way, and I wouldn't have reflected on it the same way. So the prompting to reflect and to answer my own questions basically was in a very objective manner, and I don't feel like I was led to think or believe or say anything, kind of came to some conclusions on my own.

Consistent with previous findings, the need to establish a non-judgmental relationship with a leadership coaching client is paramount for success; otherwise the client may be hesitant to provide details into personal challenges and needs (Aguilar, 2017; Cleary & Horsfall, 2015; Farver & Holt, 2015). Many leadership coaches continually restated the goals, objectives, and tenets of coaching well into multiple meetings with the client; this was geared to establishing trust which Frieda described as:

...reiterating this is completely confidential was beneficial. I felt like things were completely objective, and that took any sense of or preconceived notion of prejudice or judgment that might come about, there just was never any instance where I felt that I was being judged for any of my own insecurities or what we discussed and I think that really set the tone.

The establishment of a non-judgmental atmosphere for leadership coaching sessions corresponds to other perceptions by study participants regarding confidentiality, trust, and the establishment of a bond with their coach. Julie summed up her perception of non-judgmental coaching as,

...it's probably just [the coach's] personality, but she's so approachable and easy to talk to that she never made me feel...uncomfortable. I never felt like it was something I had to do or something that I was being graded on or something that I should be concerned about in any way.

***Sub-theme: Self-confidence.*** Naturally employees in new positions will question their abilities as new challenges are encountered. The role of an assistant principal is comprised of many aspects of running a school from multiple areas such as academics, discipline, finance, facility maintenance, human resources, and many other areas (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Enomoto, 2012). Yet previous studies have pointed out many new school administrators feel they were inadequately prepared for the challenges of school leadership and therefore lacked the self-confidence to achieve their goals (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Enomoto, 2012; Forde et al., 2012; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Study participants consistently discussed their lack of self-confidence in dealing with these new challenges and the overwhelming sense of responsibility; Alvin stated, “I didn't know that I was going to be making what I see are huge decisions.”

Consistent with previous research regarding the effectiveness of increasing self-confidence through leadership coaching (Sonesh et al., 2015) the strategies employed by coaches during the study allowed clients to find their own answers to their dilemmas which thereby increased their self-confidence. Christina shared her gratitude for the use of her coach as a sounding board for ideas.

It almost gave me that opportunity to kind of bounce things off her and then she would ask me some leading questions and it would be like I kind of solved my own problems but through taking the time to actually talk through it with myself and her.

Eventually, the participants realized the effectiveness of the coaching strategies and how they could utilize those outside of the coaching sessions. Elise stated:

I eventually think [the coach] got me to the answer or helped me get there on my own. I think it was being pushed to make me think through situations that I might have just

given that half a second thought to, and then I had the opportunity to give a lot more time to.

The experience of the coaching sessions and the realization of real self-actualized growth were summed up by Heather: “The confidence level in myself and my ability to do this position and to know I’m on the right track has grown tremendously,” and by Christina: “It gives them more confidence by validating and empowering them to move forward in the leadership role, to advocate for themselves in the leadership role.”

Continually, study participants expressed an increase in their overall self-confidence as a result of their experiences with leadership coaching. As expressed up by Frieda, “I realized what I was reflecting on was my self-confidence and my continual questioning of myself and realizing that I didn't have to do that as much as I was. So that really was an ‘Aha!’ moment for me.”

Gianna summed up the study participants’ viewpoints on their growth via leadership coaching and the effect on their self-confidence.

It was really a great opportunity to reflect on challenges or problems and think about the best way to approach or go about solving them. I have the answers, I can mostly, usually figure out the best way to go about it. But sometimes you just need someone to either listen or someone to repeat what you're saying or someone to ask those guiding or clarifying questions to help you accomplish and get through those challenging pieces of working either with other teachers, and ultimately, surely it's beneficial for supporting the students in the building.

**Theme: SLA for learning.** The school district in which all of the participants were employed utilized a professional learning format named the Superintendents Leadership Academy (SLA), through which executive leadership coaching was one of the support

mechanisms for the newly appointed assistant principals. The school district participating in the study understood there was a lack of preparation specifically for the role of assistant principal as noted in previous studies (Gurley et al., 2015; Schulz, Munday, Kupczynski, & Jones, 2016).

The goal of the school district's SLA program is to provide additional learning opportunities for new assistant principals and to assist the new leaders through their transition into their new roles.

Comparable to the participants' perceptions regarding executive leadership coaching as a tool for increasing their knowledge, the participants expressed a variation in their comments regarding the importance of their SLA experience for learning how to be a school administrator. Most participants were similar in their positive sentiment of SLA. Debra explained she was pleased with the resources and knowledge she gained from SLA: "I think SLA did a great job of preparing us about the roles and responsibilities of an AP [assistant principal]." As the analysis of participant viewpoints continued sub-themes of networking with district leaders and networking with colleagues began to be formulated in the data. Participants continuously discussed the use of networking with fellow building administrators as well as district leaders as a key component of their learning experience through SLA.

***Sub-theme: Networking with district leaders.*** Part of the district's SLA format was meeting and working with various key people at the district level from many different departments. The intent of those meetings was to provide face time with key personnel at the district level and allow study participants to hear directly from those leaders about their roles at the district level, what that role entails, and how that role affects schools. Research by Allen and Weaver (2014) indicate such programs that allow for the creation of interconnected networks is effective for building capacity within building-level administrators and providing support for new leaders.

The role of assistant principal is constantly evolving and becoming more complex as mandates for student achievement growth continue to increase (Bastian & Henry, 2015). Most participants were grateful for their SLA experience due in large part to meeting other district leaders. Elise presented approval of her SLA experience based on the size and complexity of the district as well as getting to know key players in the county office.

That's very important. It's critical. The county is so large and there are so many people and they have so many different roles. And so, in my position, I'm constantly having to pick up the phone and call, if I don't know something, if I need help with a schedule, like today, I needed some assistance, so I know who I need to contact.

Alvin further expressed appreciation for meeting district leaders specifically for understanding what role they play in student achievement and making connections that he regularly uses for assistance.

I know that if it's curriculum-based, I know that I can call here, here, here. If it's more athletic-based, I can go here. If it's discipline-based, then maybe I can go to [this] office and just get all that kind of stuff. Just knowing where your outlets are for depending on what the case may be, that was the big deal.

A few participants viewed the SLA program from a lens of district goals and aspirations which allow those participants to see the big picture from a district standpoint rather than merely their own school. Bruce summed up his big picture viewpoint through SLA.

...I would say the reinforcement of perspectives at the county level, the fact that we kept hearing the same thing. I'd say that's hearing consistently the same thing over and over again, reinforced what I thought I was doing. It's nice to see in all cases, the fact that your job with your face in the sand itself has a larger perspective to it. Having them say that

time and time again, what the goals and priorities of the district were, it was really nice to hear that reinforcement.

Karina commented on her appreciation for the SLA program and the networking opportunities she received due to being new not only in the school district but also to the state. She appreciated the opportunity to network with district leaders to learn of organizational norms and processes, saying:

Yes, I do. I think especially if you're here in the county, you're becoming a principal, you go through the different slate opportunities, but I think even when you're coming from outside, I think it's good because every district...there's just a way that things are done, just there is the thought process that occurs in [the district] that I just think you need to be aware of, so that as you are developing things or thinking about how you want to lay out things, of course, you're going to have your own ideas, which is fine, but those ideas still have to work within the vision of this district.

A variation on the overall positive sentiment of the SLA program was presented by Debra, who stated only the networking aspect was beneficial, hinting to a lack of specified or individualized content otherwise.

So SLA was beneficial for networks more than it was for the skill set. We did talk about things, but it was generalized rather than specific to the things I deal with here at [the school]. To me I used SLA as a way to get clarification on things that I thought maybe was wrong, but things I didn't necessarily agree with as far as county policy or the way we approach problems.

Overwhelmingly, the reoccurring theme of the participants' perceptions was the newly formed familiarity of district personnel which allowed for easier conversations between building-

level and district leaders as well as a deeper understanding of district goals; as Elise stated, “I get to interact with them and get that knowledge and that better understanding. They can give me that insider view. It's really important to know the people that are behind the scenes and making things work.”

*Sub-theme: Networking with colleagues.* Another reoccurring sub-theme that developed through analysis of participant interviews was how important networking with other SLA participants and those connections were to the new assistant principals’ learning experience. Oleszewski et al. (2012) note in their research the position of assistant principal is not easily defined among districts or even schools as the responsibilities and expectations are rarely standardized. Many interviewees discussed the vast amount of new knowledge over multiple areas they were required to learn as well as their dependence on each other for knowledge. The creation of a cohort of new school administrators through the SLA process allowed a network to form which provided the novice administrators additional avenues for guidance.

Similar to participant viewpoints on the use of reflective practice through leadership coaching, participants also commented on their network of colleagues through SLA as opportunities to reflect and discuss collaboratively. Gianna described how her network of colleagues helped define her role at a new school.

When we were collaborating, we broke out into different groups and discussed amongst our teams. So there were opportunities for us to reflect in SLA, and I think that's the most important piece, allowing people new to the roles to think about how that looks in your building and then respond and hear from each other.

Participants regularly used their collegial network as learning opportunities to gain knowledge as well as skills for use in their schools. Julie commented on her use of others' stories as learning tools to add to her toolbox, saying that there was a

...lot of hearing other people's stories. A lot of times, we would talk in SLA group and they would ask questions about what was going on and hearing other people's stories and how they deal with things helped a lot. And we did some little group assignments sometimes in SLA and just getting together with that little small table group of whoever and it was usually mixed, high school, middle school, and elementary school people. Having that mixed experience, hearing how they were all dealing with the situations was nice.

A variation of the positive aspect of collegial networks through SLA was the ability to hear from other assistant principals in different schools and various levels such as elementary, middle, or high schools. Karina explained her utilization of colleague experiences from different schools shared through SLA as enabling her to gain a bigger perspective outside of her own school setting and her personal experiences.

No, I like the cohort part. That's just most helpful, you get different views and perspectives because you're in a cohort because we're all not high school, we're all not that middle...so you get the perspective from anybody, what elementary, how are they handling it, why does middle school handle it, why does high school...and everybody has good ideas no matter what level you are actually at that you can actually use. Having the different perspectives, I think is good...we're always sharing ideas so that we could get more tools in our toolbox to be able to work where we are.



Networking with their fellow school administrators afforded participants greater collaboration which resulted in additional learning opportunities for the participants outside of a formal classroom environment. Gianna summarized the participants' overall SLA collegial networking experiences as:

...just having an opportunity to know who, it provides that level of comfort, we're all in this together, it's all a learning experience, these are some people who you can reach out to, maybe going through the same experience as you. So to me it was positive. It was great for learning.

**Theme: SLA for support.** Comparable to study participant perceptions relating to leadership coaching for increased self-confidence the use of collegial networks to provide non-evaluative support for beginning administrators has been noted in previous studies (Forde et al., 2012). As data analysis of participant viewpoints continued within this study a main theme developed regarding the use of SLA for support similar to the use of leadership coaching for support.

Participants also frequently commented on their reliance on the SLA process as a support mechanism to help them process their experiences and define their personal needs. As noted in previous studies, most newly appointed school administrators experience feelings of isolation and sometime abandonment as they struggle to find guidance and support (Enomoto, 2012; Farver & Holt, 2015). Similar to participant comments regarding coaching for support, the variation of the participants' viewpoints discussed their need for emotional support during the tumultuous transition as a building-level administrator, as exemplified by Elise, who said, "...then sometimes, you just need to vent. Your circle gets smaller and smaller, who you can vent to, and know that it's going to stay here." Analogous to the participant perception variations

between coaching for learning and coaching for support, the views regarding SLA were comparable in that the participants' experiences allowed for professional learning while also creating opportunities for emotional support through a network of colleagues for support.

***Sub-theme: Networking for support.*** Parallel to participant perceptions regarding the use of SLA networking opportunities to learn additional information and skills, analysis of participant comments revealed their dependency on those same SLA networks to provide support during difficult situations. Many participants discussed their reliance on other assistant principals as a resource to help with their new challenges. Alvin detailed his use of the SLA networking opportunities as a positive for a new hire outside of the school district, noting that he liked the SLA

...just because of the network. We call people, email people, names with faces, you know they're in the county, you don't necessarily cross paths with them all the time, but you can if you need to. For an outsider coming in, who literally may have known two people, that's big for me.

The peer network established through SLA was regularly used to help the new assistant principals handle difficult circumstances. Julie stated she regularly relied on her new cohort of colleagues to seek assistance for new and challenging situations. "Every week, I was writing somebody, saying, 'This happened on the bus, How would you handle it?' That kind of thing weekly." Adele added her positive perception of SLA networking for support as a bonding experience.

SLA allowed us the opportunity to network with other people which has been a great thing. Especially that got us through our first year and that way we would kind of boots on the ground and experiencing some stuff, so I was grateful for the time I got there.

The bonding and peer relationship viewpoint continued from many participants as they discussed job specific experiences which could only be truly understood by others in similar situations. Debra commented on her gratitude for those relationships and the time to commiserate with one another.

I really feel like that relationship piece, it was important to me this year. SLA II, I've got a team of seven. So if I've got to be out of the building for a couple hours, it's nice. It's a good time to get away and kind of breathe the fresh air. Eat lunch like a real person. And then, have some fellowship time and then come back. So I enjoyed the format. I think it worked really well.

Karina added her appreciation for the collegial friendships that arose from SLA.

Yes. Like, we're all in getting our degree together too, so we do call upon one another when we have class or any time that we meet, we go to lunch, we still talk about what's going on with us in particular at our schools where we're having difficulties or how they have actually handled different scenarios.

Debra summed up the participants' viewpoints on their appreciation and use of the SLA network for support, saying:

I have really developed some strong friendships and people that I'm connected to that whenever I need something, we shoot off an email or we shoot off a text. So I feel as if we've been through the fires with this group of people in SLA.

## **Summary**

The analyzed experiences of the participants' viewpoints regarding their involvement with leadership coaching through the Superintendents Leadership Academy (SLA) exposed four themes that were variations of participant experiences; Coaching for Learning, Coaching for

Support, SLA for Learning, and SLA for Support. The primary variations of the participants' experiences were that of perceiving leadership coaching as well as their SLA experience as both a learning opportunity as well as a supportive role.

In the realm of learning opportunities, the participants described leadership coaching as assisting with their reflective practice and goal setting, increasing their self-efficacy, and providing learning opportunities through experienced coaches who were previous or current school administrators. Another variation of participant perception of leadership coaching was the supportive aspects of those services through the trials and tribulations of learning to be a school administrator. Whereas, the use of leadership coaching for support descriptions included themes of meeting their needs through individualization, their comments also included themes of confidentiality, non-judgmental coaches, and assisting with an increase in the participants' own self-confidence.

Variations in participants' viewpoints regarding their participation in the Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA) were also presented as possessing both learning opportunities as well as supportive mechanisms. Those variations relating to SLA as a learning opportunity included networking with district leadership as well as networking with other newly appointed assistant principals. In relation to utilizing SLA for support the participants described their reliance on their newly formed networks of colleagues.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of newly appointed assistant principals on the effectiveness of leadership coaching through a district created leadership academy titled the Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA). The focus of the study was the variation of participant experiences with leadership coaching and SLA in regards to how those professional learning opportunities impacted the neophytes in the study and their perceived leadership growth and self-efficacy. Participants in the study were from a mid-sized suburban school district outside a large American city in the southeastern United States.

This phenomenographic study addressed one research question:

What is the lived experience of newly appointed assistant principals who receive executive coaching through a leadership academy?

The conceptual framework of the study was based on transformational learning theory which was first advocated by Mezirow (1991) who stated humans create meaning of their lives through their experiences (1997) and that true learning takes place as humans alter their previous perceptions based on new experiences (Bouchard, 2013). Furthermore, transformational learning is based on a constructivist philosophy in that individuals use experiences to create meaning (Cox, 2015; Creswell, 2013). Both of these points are important in relation to this study as the research was focused on perceptions and experiences of participants regarding executive coaching and a leadership academy, specifically how the participants interpreted those experiences and their descriptions of their growth as school leaders. The theoretical framework for this study was connected to the conceptual framework through transformational learning;

specifically how adult learning is characterized by changes in previous conceptions due to new knowledge or experiences and the use of critical reflection (Cox, 2015; Mezirow, 1991). Stake (2010) suggests there is no true meaning that is universal to all individuals in relation to an event or phenomenon; rather each is interpreted individually and therefore may be experienced differently, which supported the use of phenomenography as a research method for this study. Unforeseen challenges faced by novice assistant principals in an unfamiliar role presented opportunity for reflection and growth (transformation) through which the implementation of a leadership coaching program to support that growth could increase the capacity of that beginner school leader. The transformation of the study participants as expressed through their perceptions of experiences with leadership coaching and the leadership academy was the impetus for this study.

A review of literature exposed the need for leadership coaching as well as specific professional learning opportunities explicitly for the role of assistant principal (Oleszewski et al., 2013). Few previous studies focused on leadership coaching for assistant principals while scarce studies analyzed the perceptions of novice school administrators in relation to leadership as well as dedicated learning opportunities for assistant principals. Leadership coaching has been shown in previous studies to be an effective support mechanism to build capacity within leaders in line with the organization's mission and goals (Cerni et al., 2010; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2014; Iverson, 2016; MacKie, 2015; Sperry, 2013). Sonesh et al. (2015) recognized multiple positives for employees who received leadership coaching including increased "performance, coping skills, work attitudes, goal-directed self-regulation, and well-being" (p. 190). Many assistant principals previously expressed a lack of preparation for their ever-changing role (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Enomoto, 2012; Oleszewski et al., 2012) with most dedicated professional

learning programs geared explicitly toward the role of the principalship and not that of an assistant principal (Harvey, 1994). As leadership coaching continues to gain momentum in the business world it has slowly transitioned into the educational profession. However, the use of coaching specifically towards educational leaders continues to be based on the same concepts used in the private sector (Huff et al., 2013; Lochmiller, 2013; Mangin, 2014; Wise & Hammack, 2011).

### **Context of Findings**

This study explored the lived experiences of newly appointed assistant principals and their perceptions of executive leadership coaching services that they received through a professional learning program within their school district. Through participant interviews the beginning administrators were able to express their perceptions of the challenges they faced within their new roles, the support they needed and received, and their hopes and intentions for the future. Perceptions of the participants were divided into four major themes then further subdivided to analyze nuances in the variation of their viewpoints.

#### **Coaching for Learning**

A major theme of coaching for learning developed from data analysis through participant viewpoints of their own increased skill sets and knowledge through the coaching sessions they received from professionally endorsed coaches. Through the interview process participants frequently discussed their professional growth during their first year of school administration and how that growth was affected by their experiences with leadership coaching. The theme of coaching for learning was further refined by variations in participant viewpoints into subthemes of Reflective Practice and Goal Setting, Self-Efficacy, and Learning from an Experienced Coach. These subthemes of coaching for learning delved deeper into distinctions of participant

experiences to explore the nuances of their viewpoints regarding how they gained knowledge from the coaching services received during the study.

***Reflective practice and goal setting.*** As with all professional learning opportunities designed for school personnel, the ultimate goal is for increased student achievement. Research data indicates school leadership specifically has a strong correlation to school effectiveness and therefore student achievement (Oleszewski et al., 2012). A meta-analysis of 25 previous studies indicates reflective school leaders increase their influence on student achievement and therefore have a positive impact on their schools (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Overwhelmingly participants in this study expressed satisfaction and personal growth in their perceived effectiveness as school leaders through the skills and strategies learned through executive leadership coaching specifically in the areas of reflective practice and goal setting.

Consistently, the inexperienced administrators in the study commented on their perceptions of the massive amounts of data, issues, and crises they faced on a daily basis and the resulting struggles to deal with those concerns in a timely manner. Participants touted the lessons and skills learned from leadership coaching as providing tools to prioritize and create action plans to deal with those emerging issues. Establishing and reinforcing the practice of being reflective and setting short as well as long term goals are tenets of leadership coaching (Aguilar, 2017; Ely et al., 2010). Consistent with previous research, coaching supported participants in their planning, goal setting, and follow-through of those objectives. (Aguilar, 2017; Cerni et al., 2010; Farver & Holt, 2015). Previous studies by Farver and Holt (2015) found using coaching strategies with school administrators trickled down to classroom teachers as well which provided those educational professionals with additional tools for their specialized needs.



Many of the new school leaders in the study discussed their failures and setbacks in dealing with new situations and how leadership coaching allowed them to work through those struggles, to be reflective, and to develop new paradigms to prepare for the future. The creation of a safe, secure environment of trust where a client can share personal and vulnerable feelings is paramount in any coaching connection (Aguilar, 21017; Warren & Kelsen, 2013). Similar to findings from Farver and Holt (2015) participants in this study detailed the use of leadership coaching strategies which allowed the participants to view situations through various lenses, to reflect on different options, and develop goals to meet the need at hand. The Annenberg Institute for Education Reform (2004) suggested the use of coaching may also inspire collaborative, collegial relations among school and community stakeholders to increase student achievement, pedagogy, accountability, and social justice issues within the administrators' schools.

The ability to be reflective after a setback, to work through the emotions of failure, and to develop new options for various issues was consistently presented as a positive sentiment by the participants as increasing their personal and professional satisfaction. This sentiment is consistent with previous leadership coaching research which found increases in personal job satisfaction as well as increased productivity in the business sector (Jones et al., 2014).

*Self-efficacy.* Petridou, Nicolaidou, and Williams (2014) describe self-efficacy as an individual's belief in the capacity to complete tasks which contribute directly to the fulfillment of selected goals. Participants in the study routinely discussed their self-doubt and questioning of their abilities throughout their first year in school administration. Participants expressed the need for additional support specifically in the area of self-efficacy which is consistent with Enomoto (2012), who reported many administrators describe little to no support once in the position of building-level leadership, and the feeling of abandonment with scarce support which is only

available after a need arises. Characteristically among high-performing professionals, the beginning administrators in this study longed for a support mechanism to increase their self-efficacy in a safe and nurturing atmosphere.

The process of change within an individual, however, is not simple, easy, or quick. Hanssmann (2014) points out transformational change can only take place once a vital alteration has occurred in a client's perspective through the establishment of a safe and secure coaching environment. Leadership coaching is intended to increase the leadership capacity of successful professionals (Cleary & Horsfall, 2015; Ely et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2014) which is why the use of failures and setbacks from the participants' experiences were used by their leadership coaches as learning opportunities for growth and increased self-efficacy rather than self-defeating occasions contributing to doubt and inefficiency.

Ultimately, the increased self-efficacy of building leaders is intended to equate to increased student achievement within their schools. Through the establishment of a safe, secure, and nurturing relationship between a coach and a school leader, previous studies also confirmed increased self-efficacy for the recipients of leadership coaching (Warren & Kelsen, 2013). The effects of the increased self-efficacy for school leaders does not stop with that single professional; research suggests higher self-efficacy in school leaders results in the creation of more challenging goals within the school (Petridou et al., 2014) which therefore may increase student achievement. Farver and Holt (2015) report school leaders who received leadership coaching were able to model similar skills and strategies they learned with their subordinates which translated into increased self-efficacy for classroom teachers as well. In the end, the intention is for school personnel to sharpen their skills and abilities to positively affect student achievement.

*Learning from an experienced coach.* Consistent with previous requests for additional support and training for beginning administrators (Ely et al., 2017), the participants in this study also expressed their desire to communicate with an experienced, veteran school administrator. However, the requested dialogue between the novice and veteran administrator was expressed by participants as taking place in a leadership coaching scenario rather than a mentoring environment. The study participants were clear in their preference for a leadership coach who provided non-judgmental, self-learning strategies rather than the direct instructional methodology of a mentorship. Previous studies implied effective leadership coaching occurs through the establishment of a safe and secure environment in which a partnership is created between the coach and the client (Aguilar, 2017; Cleary & Horsfall, 2015; Farver & Holt, 2015), which was corroborated by the viewpoints of the participants in this study.

Regularly, participants discussed their appreciation for coaching through the use of self-learning or “Aha!” moments, which are more inductive rather than deductive educational opportunities. Previous research supports the participants’ viewpoints regarding missed professional learning opportunities between formal training of school administrators prior to their appointments as building leaders and the reality of their countless tasks and expectations after being placed in school leadership roles (Enomoto, 2012). The perceptions of the study participants, coupled with previous studies that purport inadequate training and lack of focus on the role of the assistant principal, has resulted in unexploited opportunities for the position as a training ground for future principals (Oleszewski et al., 2012).

As discussed earlier, one-size-fits all mentality toward professional development is not applicable to school leadership due to a multitude of variables. The roles and expectations of assistant principals are neither precise nor interchangeable within a district (Oleszewski et al.,

2012). Participants discussed their appreciation working with veteran administrators through their individual professional obstacles and in the development of their personal future goals and action plans in a non-hierarchical supervisor-to-employee setting. Statements by participants regarding their leaders'/coaches' skillful questioning which allowed for inductive learning were regularly made with positive sentiments; participants realized during the interviews their leadership coaches' guiding questioning was a product of the coaches' previous school administration experience. Viewpoints within this study indicate participants learned more through a non-supervisory, coaching relationship with a veteran school administrator than through a traditional mentorship or with their manager/supervisor. The viewpoints of the participants are in line with earlier studies which attribute the effectiveness of leadership coaching as increased by a coach who has personally experienced the needs and challenges of beginning administrators (Aguilar, 2017; Warren & Kelsen, 2013).

### **Coaching for Support.**

Another major theme developed through data analysis regarding leadership coaching as support mechanism for participants resulting in the theme of coaching for support. During the interview process participants frequently discussed their reliance on leadership coaching sessions as providing individualized support, confidential support, their coach using non-judgmental methods and the building of their self-confidence in their new roles as school leaders. These subthemes of coaching for support indicate the variations of participant experiences as to how the new administrators used leadership coaching to assist in dealing with obstacles.

*Individualized.* A variation of study participants' perceptions regarding the use of leadership coaching for support was their gratitude for the individualization of the support mechanism. Hanssmann (2014) points out the importance of a leadership coach to see the

individual potential in a client; the ability to build up the client and push the client toward distinct goals, which many participants stated was valued in regards to their experience with leadership coaching. Repeatedly, participants articulated their appreciation for leadership coaching as an “all about me” mechanism in which the goals and intent of the support was to increase their leadership capacity based on their specific needs and situations. These comments by study participants corroborate previous research by Farver and Holt (2015) which suggests leadership coaching effectiveness is due to the individualization of coaching developed on the specific needs of the school administrators based on their abilities and skills.

Many study participants discussed previous learning opportunities in which they spent hours, and in some cases days, engaged in professional development which did not meet their specific needs nor applied to their explicit situations. Previous studies in the use of leadership coaching recognize the intent is to focus on the individual needs of the participants and their organizations, which has led to an increase in job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Aguilar, 2017; Cleary & Horsfall, 2015; Ely et al., 2010).

***Confidential.*** Study participants shared their gratitude for coaching sessions being confidential between themselves and their leadership coach, in which nothing discussed during the sessions was shared with their principal or district leadership. Similar findings had been reported in that leadership coaching cannot be effective without a strong coach-client relationship built on trust and confidentiality (Aguilar, 2017; Ely et al., 2010). The need for a leadership coach to establish a confidential relationship with the client is paramount in order to gain trust and allow for productive coaching to take place (Aguilar, 2017; Cleary & Horsfall, 2015; Farver & Holt, 2015). Study participants commented the establishment of trust based on

confidentiality of sessions allowed them to be more open and free with their struggles as well as honest with their commitment to action plans and future goals.

*Non-judgmental.* Another popular sub-theme found in data analysis was the importance of the leadership coach maintaining a non-judgmental position during the coaching sessions. Repeatedly, participants commented how comfortable they were opening up to their coach to discuss successes but more importantly failures they had encountered as novice school administrators. Comparable to research by Farver and Holt (2015), coaching clients felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, goals, and ultimately their fears with their leadership coach which provided avenues to address those concerns and to develop action plans. The perception of a non-judgmental coach allowed for deeper understanding of the participants' setbacks and how they may have personally contributed to those disappointments which allowed the leadership coach and the client to develop goals and actions plans to move forward in a positive, constructive manner. The establishment of a non-judgmental, trusting, and confidential bond between a client and coach to allow for honest and frank discussions to set goals is a guiding principle of leadership coaching (Ely et al., 2010).

Farver and Holt (2015) found school administrators were often quite competitive due to ever-increasing demands for increased student achievement between schools. School leaders in the study commented they were cautious to collaborate out of concerns for being judged by their peers or district staff. The use of a professional learning mechanism such as leadership coaching in which school administrators can share their failures, concerns, and fears in a safe and supportive environment potentially allows for greater growth and thoughtful reflective practice by professional educators. This is consistent with Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory in that individuals need safe, secure, yet challenging environments in order for

transformational learning to occur. Furthermore, prior reports by Weinberg (2016) conclude the use of leadership coaching may be a preventative methodology to significant “psychological strain during a period of challenging change” (p. 103) such as that experienced by novice school leaders.

*Self-confidence.* The last sub-theme to emerge from data analysis for leadership coaching was the perception by many study participants in the growth of their self-confidence as school administrators through leadership coaching services. This variation of participant perceptions developed from probing questions resulting from popular comments describing leadership coaching as a positive experience; participants were asked to delve deeper into their viewpoints to describe how coaching impacted their professional lives. In this sub-theme many participants detailed coaching sessions that started with negative feelings toward a school event or issue, from which the coach assisted the client in developing a SMART goal, then following up in subsequent sessions to determine the effectiveness of the goal(s). A fundamental approach to guiding clients through goal creation and attainment is the use of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-explicit (SMART) goals through leadership coaching (Aguilar, 2013). The perception of increased self-confidence arose from the successes many participants reported as a result of the development and implantation of SMART goals to address previous negative school events or concerns. Those participant perceptions are in line with previous research from Correia et al. (2016) who report the implementation of self-questioning of the client through difficult or challenging situations to create and implement plans and goals is a major strategy of leadership coaching and one of the most effective tools for coaches and clients.

Farver and Holt (2015) assert that leadership coaching increased school administrator self-confidence by providing skills and strategies to increase communication. Leadership

coaching always paved the way for more effective use of SMART goals through which future successes build upon the leader's self-confidence. The increase in self-confidence is similar to research by Grant (2014) which posited that the use of executive coaching during transitional change is needed to build psychological resiliency in the leader while also supporting organizational goals. However, the effectiveness of leadership coaching is contingent on the clients' willingness and commitment to the process (Jones et al., 2014). Therefore, it is imperative for a leadership coach to quickly and efficiently develop a rapport with the client and to create a safe and secure atmosphere in which the client can share confidentially in a non-judgmental space (Ely et al., 2017).

### **Superintendent's Leadership Academy for Learning**

The use of leadership coaching as a support mechanism for newly appointed school administrators in this study was part of a series of professional learning opportunities within the school district called the Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA). SLA was created by the school district as a program to develop school administrators from within the district and consisted of multiple iterations of SLA, from which the participants in the study were part of SLA II. SLA II is specifically geared toward beginning assistant principals; SLA I is for teacher leaders while SLA III is for veteran assistant principals aspiring for a principalship or district leadership roles. The development of the in-house training for beginning school leaders by the district in the study is similar to other such programs in California, Colorado, Florida, and New York (Gurley et al., 2015).

During the study interview process, additional follow-up questions were asked of participants to differentiate their viewpoints between coaching and the other services and learning opportunities they received through SLA. The following themes were developed from



variations in participants' perceptions specifically regarding their SLA experience, and how those viewpoints coupled with leadership coaching impacted their growth as school leaders.

**Networking within a school district.** Previous research indicates assistant principals are not adequately prepared for their role, nor are they adequately prepared for their future roles as principals (Gurley et al., 2015; Schulz et al., 2016). While the role of the assistant principal has become more complex due to increased requirements on schools as well as crucial in order to transform schools to meet the needs of future students (Oleszewski et al., 2012), few professional development programs are intended specifically for the role of assistant principal (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Gurley et al., 2015); rather, most are concentrated on classroom teachers and the principalship (Harvey, 1994).

The school district in which the study took place shaped its SLA as a means to provide professional learning opportunities specifically for beginning assistant principals. While the role of an assistant principal varies widely with the district, as is consistent with research from other school districts that have instituted in-house professional learning for school administrators (Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012), the intent of the SLA program is to provide newly appointed assistant principals an opportunity to meet and dialogue with district leaders. During the yearlong SLA program each major department in the district sent its top leadership, including administrative assistants, to meet and describe the role each department plays in support of local schools. An objective during the SLA experience was for novice school leaders to put a name with a face of those who they will be working with in district leadership positions to meet the needs of their students. An analysis of interviews revealed that multiple participants commented on the importance of hearing from district personnel about those positions and how those professionals impacts schools.

Most of the top leaders in the district were former school administrators with decades of experience at the building-level; this was repeatedly commented by the study participants as a positive of the SLA process in meeting and networking with veteran administrators. Many district leadership administrators had previous experience in the same schools as the current assistant principals in the SLA program and know intimately the challenges faced by the inexperienced administrators. Regularly, participants commented on their appreciation for the support they received from district leaders through SLA and their understanding in the growing pains new school administrators experience especially during their first tumultuous year as a school leader. Spending time, questioning, and discussing school leadership concerns with district staff were regularly described by study participants as a positive for their understanding and growth, which is consistent with research by Gurley et al. (2015).

**Networking with other assistant principals.** Enomoto (2012) asserts educational leadership research is mainly focused on the principalship rather than the demands of and effectiveness of the role of assistant principal to prepare future principals. While it is universally assumed the assistant principalship is a pathway to the principalship, the specific roles of an assistant principal are often quite different than a principal's and therefore require a clear set of training focused on those responsibilities. The specific needs of assistant principals were explicitly identified and targeted within the SLA program in the study and have been refined over the years since the program has been established.

A product of the SLA platform is the creation of a cohort of newly appointed assistant principals that are lumped together from across the district to include all school levels (elementary, middle, and high). This is intentional by the school district as the goal is to allow new school leaders to form a broad network of colleagues to whom they can turn to for advice to

collaborate in the solving of school issues. Similar to the confidentiality and non-judgmental viewpoint of leadership coaching, the networking amongst beginning school administrators from within SLA provided an additional layer of support to seek out answers to complex and unforeseen issues.

Repeatedly, study participants commented on their reliance on other SLA participants to answer questions they would rather not ask their principal or district leadership. The concern in asking district leadership or their principals for help was noted by study participants as a lack of self-confidence or fear of appearing unprepared. Participants noted their use of the SLA network of new school administrators to answer questions occurred at least monthly, with many utilizing their colleagues weekly for advice on their path of learning and mastering their new role as a school leader. Learning from and networking with other school administrators further developed the new assistant principals' understanding of the intricacies of a school district and how to meet those organizational norms, which has been noted in previous research (Gurley et al., 2015; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Participants discussed how collaboration with other beginning school administrators from multiple levels (elementary, middle, and high) provided varying viewpoints on issues and allowed for the development of inventive solutions to complex problems; this is also consistent with research on similar in-district professional development for assistant principals by Gurley et al. (2015).

### **Superintendent's Leadership Academy for Support**

As study participants explored their emotional needs during the study interview process it became necessary to differentiate between the use of leadership coaching for that support and the use of the district's Superintendent's Leadership Academy (SLA) to meet the participants' needs. Additional probing and follow-up questions allowed participants to delve deeper into their

perceptions and feelings regarding both leadership coaching and the SLA process which helped to develop the theme of SLA for Support during the data analysis of the interviews. While the main goal of SLA by the district is to increase the leadership capacity of the newly appointed school leaders, another equally important feature is to provide support for those school administrators to handle the stress and anxiety of modern school leadership. During the interview process it became clear participants relied on both leadership coaching and SLA for emotional as well as educational opportunities. The following are the variations of the participants' viewpoints regarding the emotional support they received through the SLA program.

**Networking.** Increasingly, assistant principals encounter a deluge of issues ranging from budgetary, supervisory, and instructional needs to more managerial tasks such as scheduling, maintenance, and supplies (Oleszewski et al., 2012). Many of those areas of responsibility were presented as cursory topics through school administrator preparatory programs within school districts or universities. Previous studies noted school administrators feel isolated and alone with no one to turn to for guidance and support (Enomoto, 2012; Farver & Holt, 2015). Several school districts provide mentors to their beginning administrators, yet many of those mentorships are filled by district leadership or in most cases by the new administrators' principal. This potentially creates a conflict for the new leader to admit a lack of knowledge or a failure to the supervisor when all that is needed is guidance and time to grow. Many school administrators from previous studies report a feeling of abandonment with scarce support which is only available after the need is presented (Enomoto, 2012). Furthermore, Enomoto (2012) also postulates beginning school administrators may be reluctant to request support out of caution for appearing to be unprepared to handle the new position and its responsibilities.

Parallel to the use of networking within SLA to learn from district leadership and other assistant principals, study participants regularly discussed their reliance on the SLA network for emotional support during their whirlwind first year of school leadership. Repeatedly, participants commented on the need to vent to someone who understood the complexity of the role of school administrator as well as the frustrations that accompany the position. The accumulation of stressful events and taxing issues quickly becomes a factor for most beginning school administrators, which presents as fatigue and other health issues as well as self-doubt and questioning of their career path. Study participants regularly discussed their utilization of their network through SLA as a mechanism to discuss high-impact events and issues at school with colleagues in similar situations and how that network of other beginning assistant principals aided in their stress management from a non-judgmental, safe, and supportive environment. The use of in-district professional development to encourage cohorts of beginning school leaders to network for support is synonymous with research by Gurley et al. (2015).

### **Limitations of Findings**

Most of the limitations in this study are as a result of a first-time endeavor into scholarly research by the author. The use of phenomenography as a research method for the study was appropriate, however, phenomenography is not as well-known as other research methods and as such the researcher admits it is not easily mastered. Furthermore, the use of vague, open-ended questioning of study participants to allow them freedom to delve into their perceptions presented many avenues for further questioning and produced large amounts of transcribed data. It became obvious to the researcher the art of interviewing is mastered through practice and therefore the researcher will increase in skill as additional research studies are conducted. Furthermore, the use of alternative research methods such as a mixed methods study utilizing both qualitative as

well as quantitative information may shed additional information regarding the effectiveness of leadership coaching with novice school leaders.

The pool of participants from which the study was conducted was limited due to the unique situation in which leadership coaching was used in conjunction with a professional development program specifically for assistant principals within the participating school district. Originally the number of participants invited was set at 18; however, only 13 agreed to participate in this study. Similarly, the use of newly appointed assistant principals from a single school district north of a large metropolitan city in the southern United States may present challenges in replicating the study due to cultural norms.

As novice school leaders with a natural desire to climb into higher levels of school leadership, the participants in the study were hesitant to provide information that could be construed as negative for this or any professional development opportunity they were provided by the district. Previously disclosed actions to ensure confidentiality and protection of the participant data were discussed; however, the participants were acquaintances of the researcher and colleagues with the other leadership coaches; therefore, concerns for participant openness were still present.

### **Implications of Findings**

Naturally, personnel in a new position will experience a learning curve in which new paradigms must be created regarding standard operating procedures, policies and norms of conducting business, and fulfilling the role of the new position. Generally, new administrators are former classroom teachers with a general knowledge of front office operations; however, most likely possess little to no firsthand experience in daily routines of a school administrator. As stated by study participants, the use of leadership coaching to aid in increased self-efficacy

and capacity as new school leaders was a major benefit to the novice administrators. Correlating with previous studies, the participants regularly discussed their perception of an overwhelming amount of responsibilities and new knowledge required to perform their new roles to which leadership coaching supported their growth as leaders. Specifically, new school leaders need strategies to process, address, and cope with the multitude of crisis dealt with on a daily basis within school leadership. Strategies such as reflective practice and goal setting were consistently mentioned by study participants as well as in previous studies as effective methods to help school leaders address and move forward through difficult issues.

Obviously, a goal of any professional learning opportunity for school leaders is to increase their self-efficacy to positively impact student achievement. Previous studies as well as this research suggest the use of leadership coaching may influence school administrators and their effectiveness as educational leaders. This increase in self-efficacy, as suggested by this study, may stem from working with knowledgeable leadership coaches with prior school administration experience. Repeatedly past studies, as well as participant responses from this study, pointed to the expressed need of novice school leaders to enjoy access to experienced school administrators as a ready resource both for learning opportunities as well as for support. The one-to-one availability for support has consistently been advocated by current and former school leaders as more effective over one-size-fits-all professional learning due to the unique needs of each school administrator and their work locations, for which leadership coaching fulfills that need.

Supporting new school administrators is a critical component of any proposed leadership development program that should be continued well after the first few years as a new school leader. Novice school leaders need support that builds upon trust with a coach who maintains

confidentiality, is non-judgmental, and strives to increase the self-confidence of the new administrator. Once trust has been established between the leadership coach and the new school leader in connection with the use of proven leadership coaching strategies, greater growth and self-efficacy in the novice leader should result and should be continued as long as the administrator needs the support.

This study also highlighted the need for new school leaders to be part of a cohort group of experienced leaders as well as teamed with fellow beginning leaders both for learning and supportive goals. In the case of this study, the implementation of a district-wide leadership academy specifically designed to introduce new administrators to district leaders as well as to create a supportive cohort of fellow beginner building-level leaders may be effective for increasing the capacity of those new hires. The knowledge gained from working with experienced school administrators is a valuable asset for novice school leaders that should be maximized when possible. Many of the pitfalls and issues which inevitably will be experienced by school administrators may be prevented, minimized, or capitalized upon through the collaboration of beginning and experienced school leaders.

In addition to the establishment of associations with experienced school leaders, beginning administrators should also enjoy access to a cohort of other novice administrators to collaborate and utilize for additional support. The creation of cohorts of new school administrators has been suggested as being an effective additional support mechanism from which advice, guidance, and fellowship may be obtained. This study as well as others indicated new school administrators feel alone or abandoned once in their new position; the establishment of a network of novice administrators offers those professionals a group through which to seek assistance in addition to the traditional hierarchy provided in their school and/or districts.



These cohorts of novice school leaders may provide additional avenues for learning how to function in the new role as well as provide supporting roles for increased well-being.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As noted in the literature review, scarce research has been devoted into the role and specific professional development needs of the assistant principal, which in turn leaves a gap in the professional learning for that position (Schulz et al., 2016). Future research should delve into the explicit needs regarding professional learning for assistant principals as continued research should also explore the ever-changing roles of that position. Likewise, the use of leadership coaching for all school leaders needs to be explored especially for assistant principals as that role has been identified as the most likely route to a future principalship.

As suggested by the participant discussions in this study, the emotional well-being of school leaders, especially for beginning school leaders, was identified by most participants as being in jeopardy due to the overwhelming amount of stress that accompanies a position of school leadership. Future studies should focus on the emotional well-being of school leaders as a possible impetus for an increasing drop in school leader retention.

Future research may also consider the possible limitations on the use of administrators from within the same school district serving as coaches. Possibly utilizing leadership coaches from outside of the school district can reveal perceptions that were not readily provided by the participants in this study. Similarly, the sample size of future studies should strive to be increased to obtain a greater variation in participants' viewpoints.

Another consideration for future research should be on the impact race and gender may have as it relates to leadership coaching. The specific needs of new school administrators from a race and gender perspective should be reviewed and studied as leadership coaching is applied in

those circumstances. Additionally, the impact of leadership coaching from a social justice stance should also be considered as Berkovich (2014) asserts social justice is a moral responsibility of school leaders to meet the needs of marginalized individuals in order to benefit society as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

The impetus for this study stemmed from the lack of research into support mechanisms for assistant principals as well as the lack of research regarding use of leadership coaching for school leaders. The goal of the study was to explore the variation of participant perceptions on the use of leadership coaching for beginning assistant principals to add to the conversation regarding professional learning for assistant principals as well as leadership coaching for school leaders.

The need for support after a beginning school administrator has been placed into a position of school leadership is well documented. However, most professional learning for school administration is geared toward the principalship rather than for assistant principals whose roles and responsibilities are quite different and yet are unstandardized from district to district and even school to school. The use of leadership coaching has been employed for years in the private sector; however, it has only emerged as a viable support tool for school leaders within the last few years. The addition of leadership coaching to a well-developed and purposefully-created learning program especially for assistant principals is hypothesized as being an effective tool to increase the leadership capabilities of beginning school leaders on their journey to the principalship.

This phenomenographic study suggests all school administrators, especially beginning assistant principals, need dedicated support mechanisms to provide learning opportunities as well

as networking assistance to navigate the tumultuous beginning of their school leadership journeys. The use of leadership coaching as well as the establishment of cohorts of experienced and fellow novice school leaders may increase the self-efficacy of beginning school administrators, which in turn may impact student achievement.

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## Appendix A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview # \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Participant # \_\_\_\_\_

#### *Script*

Thank you for taking time out of your day to meet with me. As I explained prior to today, I am a student at Kennesaw State University, as part of my dissertation I am conducting a Phenomenographic study on newly appointed principals on their perceptions of the use of executive leadership coaching. This interview should take between 45-60 minutes and will have four main questions to which there is no right or wrong answers.

Your participation in their interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequences. I will use my digital recorder to record our conversation which will then be transcribed to allow me to gather the data for my study. Your responses will remain confidential, all data I collect will be destroyed after the study is complete.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Start Recording; "It is [date] and this is interview # \_\_\_\_\_ with participant # \_\_\_\_\_"

#### **Demographic Questions:**

1. How many years have you been in education?
2. Have you participated in executive leadership coaching prior to this experience?

#### **Main Questions**

(The answers to these questions will determine follow-up questions. The subset questions may be used to help guide the questions.)

3. What was the transition from assistant principal to principal like for you?
  - a. When you first started your new role as a principal what was the hardest part to get used to for you?
4. What are (or may be) your greatest challenges in your new role?
  - a. Are they generally positive and supportive?
5. What are your perceptions of executive leadership coaching? OR How would you describe the coaching experience?
  - a. Were your sessions generally positive and supportive?
6. How, if at all, will your experience with leadership coaching support your continued growth?
  - a. Would you recommend leadership coaching to future beginning principals?

That concludes our interview, do you have any questions?

Thank you for your time and participation.

## Appendix B

### CONSENT COVER LETTER

**Title of Research Study:** Lived Experiences of Newly Appointed Assistant Principals Who Receive Executive Coaching

**Researcher's Contact Information:** Scott Townsend, 678.740.4677,  
Scott.Townsend9@gmail.com

#### **Introduction**

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Scott Townsend of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

#### **Description of Project**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the perceptions of beginning school administrators and their views toward receiving executive leadership coaching. Newly appointed assistant principals from a suburban school district outside metro Atlanta, Georgia will be interviewed as part of a professional development model which incorporates leadership coaching into the support mechanisms for new administrators. The research question for the study will be; what are the lived experiences of newly appointed assistant principals who receive executive coaching through a leadership academy?

#### **Explanation of Procedures**

Participants will be interviewed regarding their perceptions on the use of executive leadership coaching. The time and place of the interviews will be left to the participants.

#### **Time Required**

Approximately 45- 60 minute interview.

#### **Risks or Discomforts**

There are no known risks anticipated because of taking part in this study. The risks or discomfort anticipated in the participation of this study are no greater than that of ordinary daily tasks. The participant will not be subject to physical pain or danger. The intended result of the use of executive leadership coaching is to increase the capacity of the participant and to assist in the development of strategies to overcome obstacles. Participation in the study should be interesting and enjoyable.

#### **Benefits**

Although there will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, the researcher may learn more about executive coaching and its use for newly appointed assistant principals which may influence future professional learning options and further our understanding of executive coaching as a support mechanism.

### **Compensation**

There will be no compensation for participation in the study.

### **Confidentiality**

The results of this participation will be anonymous. Participation in the study will be kept confidential; participants will be assigned a random number by the researcher for use during data collection activities in the form of interviews. Participant names or any identifying information will not be used in the study. Digital data as well as all electronic documents will be stored on an external hard drive which will be kept locked in the researchers' home office. All digital and electronic data will be destroyed within 60 days of the completion of the project.

### **Inclusion Criteria for Participation**

Participants will be recruited from a pool of newly appointed assistant principals participating in a leadership academy in a single school district north of Atlanta, Georgia. All participants will be over the age of 18 and will be new to the executive leadership coaching experience. Participation in the study is not required through the districts' leadership academy.

### **Statement of Understanding**

The purpose of this research has been explained and my participation is voluntary. I have the right to stop participation at any time without penalty. I understand that the research has no known risks, and I will not be identified. By completing this survey, I am agreeing to participate in this research project.

---

THIS PAGE MAY BE REMOVED AND KEPT BY EACH PARTICIPANT

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3403, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-2268.

## Appendix C

### KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL

[irb@kennesaw.edu](mailto:irb@kennesaw.edu)

Feb  
12

to stowns15, ajohn560

2/12/2018

Scott Townsend, Student  
KSU Department of Educational Leadership

Re: Your followup submission of 2/6/2018, Study "Adele"8-365: What is the lived experience of newly appointed assistant principals who receive executive coaching through a leadership academy?

Dear Mr. Townsend,

Your application has been reviewed by IRB members. Your study is eligible for expedited review under the FDA and DHHS (OHRP) designation of category 7 - Individual or group characteristics or behavior.

This is to confirm that your application has been approved. The protocol approved is Audio interviews to determine the perceptions of newly appointed assistant principals and their viewpoints regarding the effectiveness of leadership coaching on leadership potential. The consent procedure described is in effect.

NOTE: All surveys, recruitment flyers/emails, and consent forms must include the IRB study number noted above, prominently displayed on the first page of all materials.

You are granted permission to conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The IRB calls your attention to the following obligations as Principal Investigator of this study.

1. The study is subject to continuing review on or before 2/12/2019. At least two weeks prior to that time, go to <http://research.kennesaw.edu/irb/progress-report-form.php> to submit a progress report. Progress reports not received in a timely manner will result in expiration and closure of the study.
2. Any proposed changes to the approved study must be reported and approved prior to implementation. This is accomplished through submission of a progress report along with revised consent forms and survey instruments.
3. All records relating to conducted research, including signed consent documents, must be retained for at least three years following completion of the research. You are responsible for ensuring that all records are accessible for inspection by authorized representatives as needed. Should you leave or end your professional relationship with KSU for any reason, you are responsible for providing the IRB with information regarding the housing of research records and who will maintain control over the records during this period.
4. Unanticipated problems or adverse events relating to the research must be reported promptly to the IRB. See <http://research.kennesaw.edu/irb/reporting-unanticipated-problems.php> for definitions and reporting guidance.
5. A final progress report should be provided to the IRB at the closure of the study.

Contact the IRB at [irb@kennesaw.edu](mailto:irb@kennesaw.edu) or at (470) 578-2268 if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Christine Ziegler, Ph.D.  
KSU Institutional Review Board Director and Chair

cc: [ajohn560@kennesaw.edu](mailto:ajohn560@kennesaw.edu)

Appendix D

SCHOOL DISTRICT IRB APPROVAL

1

██████████ SCHOOL SYSTEM  
REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Name Scott Townsend

Employee: Yes  No  If NO, list employer: \_\_\_\_\_

College/University Supervising Activities Kennesaw State University

Degree in Progress (Level/Area) Ed.D.

Locations for Data Collection Off Campus

Date of Request 02/21/2018 Requested Date(s) for Data Collection March-June 2018

Professor's Name Dr. Arvin Johnson Phone #/Email ajohn560@kennesaw.edu

Include with this request:

- > A letter from your supervising professor on college or university letterhead indicating support for your research and his/her confirmation of data collection validity.
- > A brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct. (Page 2 of this form).
- > Method of data collection assessment (Page 2 of this form); Number of respondents, etc.
- > Copy of interview questions, surveys, etc. that will be used. If student data/videos are used, a notarized "Release of Educational Records for Research Purposes Confidentiality Statement" and a copy of a letter requesting parent permission to use the data will be required.

I, Scott Townsend do hereby submit to **not** hold the ██████████ liable for any findings, or commentary involved in this research. I understand that without the express written permission of the ██████████, I am not authorized to conduct any data collection involving system employees or students and/or any other information that is protected by Federal or State Law. **Furthermore, a copy of all findings and data collection instruments will be made available to the ██████████. All research is to be sent to the Office of Assessment upon completion of the project.**

Signature Scott Townsend Date 02/21/2018

Signature of Principal (if applicable) [Signature] Date 2/27/18

Send completed form to: Dr. Jennifer Scrivner, Director, Office of Assessment, ESA, Building G

**Staff Use Only**

Jennifer Scrivner  Permission given  Permission denied  
Office of Assessment

Conditions of Permission: \_\_\_\_\_ Denied due to: \_\_\_\_\_

Revised 01/2012

Please write a brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct.

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of newly appointed assistant principals and their viewpoints regarding the effectiveness of leadership coaching on their leadership potential. Few studies exist analyzing the perceptions of new assistant principals using Phenomenography as a methodology in relation to the use of executive coaching for school leaders. The findings of this study may inform the current or future knowledge base on executive coaching as a form of professional learning for assistant principals. Additionally, the perceptions of the newly appointed assistant principals in this study may reveal struggles and obstacles faced by new administrators which may strengthen future studies focusing on the specific needs of beginning school leaders. The research question for the study will be; What are the lived experiences of newly appointed assistant principals who receive executive coaching through a leadership academy?

Indicate your method of data collection assessment (surveys, interviews, and/or test data)

Data collection will be through individual interviews with participants which will be audio recorded then transcribed. The interviews will be semi structured focusing on the participants experiences with executive coaching through a leadership academy and their new roles as school administrators. Consistent with Phenomenographic research the interview questions will be intentionally left vague; the goal is to allow participants to explore their own feelings and experiences (Khan, 2014; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000).

Check the appropriate box(s) which indicate respondents:

- Administrators
- Teachers/Certified Personnel
- Classified Personnel
- Students

Note the number of data collection instruments being used (i.e., number of expected respondents)  
16 Participants via the Superintendent's Leadership Academy II

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