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## ***Supporting New School Leaders Through Mentoring***

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Mentoring may best be defined as “a process where one person provides individual support and challenge to another professional (Bush, 2009, p.379). The importance of mentoring new teachers and administrators has long been recognized. For example, since 2000 more than half of the states have passed laws requiring mentoring of new principals (Daresh, 2004; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang 2007). Most of these laws have required mentoring in the first two years of practice. Grissom & Harrington (2010) found under the mentorship model, a more experienced principal mentor provides the support, guidance, advice and sounding board as the new principal becomes acclimated to the position.

### **Literature Review**

In a study of first-year principals in Victoria, Australia, O’Mahoney (2003) found that reliance upon principal mentors was of critical importance as these new principals negotiated the challenges inherent in the position. Good mentors were seen as providing practical and useful advice about handling the multitude of tasks in leading a school. Good mentors were also seen as offering encouragement and help. In a similar study of administrator mentoring in Israel, Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010) found that establishing and sustaining good interpersonal relations between the mentor and mentee an essential component of mentoring. A good mentor was described as one who models ongoing learning, is transparent, and open.

The mentoring process of an early career principal and her female mentor was the focus involving the work of Peters (2010). The author found that the mentoring process could be described as the mentor fulfilling the role of navigator, teacher, sounding board for ideas, and a model for problem-solving. Daresh (2004) contended that good mentors are more than a role model or advisor. He discovered good mentoring involves constructive feedback to beginning principals regarding their practices. The primary goal of mentoring should be to develop the knowledge, skills, dispositions and courage to put student learning first.

Meador (2018) identified the principal as the main leader in a school. This role has been found to be difficult, demanding, and challenging (Harris, Ballenger & Leonard, 2004). Stader (2013) also identified conflict as being inherent in the professional lives of school leaders. Balancing relationships with others in the school community, utilizing discretion, and

understanding the moral imperative of school leadership has been identified as challenging, even for experienced principals (Sergiovanni & Green, 2015).

Addressing the balance of these roles and demands has been found to be particularly challenging for first- and second-year principals; therefore, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has required new school principals and assistant principals in their first administrative position to complete two years of mentoring (DESE, 2017.) The Administrator Mentor Program (AMP) was designed to provide new school principals with intensive one-on-one customized mentoring support. The program expectations identified the mentor to promote, or implement:

- a trusting relationship;
- acting as a guide, model, and coach;
- involve the mentee in reflective questioning;
- a focus on leadership competencies;
- balance challenge with support;
- and, foster problem-solving.

By providing this assistance, the program concluded the mentor would help the new principal learn how to positively impact student achievement, understand the effective use of teacher performance-based evaluation to improve teacher quality, and other ways to guide the new principal through the often difficult first two-years in their new leadership role. This implementation of the AMP program in Missouri was introduced to effectively grow and develop new principals' skills through mentoring.

Mentors for the AMP program have been selected from either internal (i.e., an experienced administrator in the district) or external sources. External mentors have been selected from a pool of experienced administrators from another district and/or from a pool of university professors with experience and certification as campus administrators. For example, a new grades 1-6 elementary principal would be teamed with a current or former elementary principal with similar experiences from their own building/district or from outside the district. DESE has viewed the AMP program to be an important and indispensable professional development opportunity for new school principals.

Mentoring has been identified as one of the more effective ways to enhance the leadership skills of new principals (Grissom and Harrington, 2010; Spiro et al., 2007); however, research into good mentoring practices and the impact of mentoring on new principals in the United States has been limited. Daresh (2004) cited a considerable need for research into school leadership development. More specifically, Daresh (2004), Grissom and Harrington (2010), and Spiro et al. (2007) mentioned the need for research into the impact of mentoring on new principal acclimation and behaviors. In addition, research into best practices and the

effectiveness of the AMP program in providing customized mentoring support in Missouri has been extremely limited.

This qualitative research study was designed to gather information of new elementary and secondary principals' perceptions of their mentoring experience. Specifically, this research was conducted to better understand effective mentoring strategies, the mentor-mentee relationship, and how the mentoring experience impacts new principals' growth in ways of thinking about their roles in improving teacher quality and student achievement.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Adult Learning Theory**

Albert Bandura (1977) asserted behavior is learned through observation. The process of mentoring has followed this research claim. Given this premise, adults have learned social roles by observing and modeling others; therefore, it can be concluded early career principals view their role and expectations through their experiences as teacher-educators and, more importantly, through observations from the behavior of their previous supervisors. Later proponents of this learning theory have assumed that mentoring would help the mentee 'learn to think like a principal'.

Several adult learning theories or models have been identified by Merriam & Bierema (2014). The authors identified the social cognitive theory as a means to describe how adults learn in a social environment (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Principal mentoring may best be viewed through the lens of social cognitive theory. In a study of mentoring relationships with doctoral students, Curtin, Malley, & Steward (2016) argued the social cognitive career theory models the development of self-efficacy necessary to transition from candidate to faculty roles in higher education. The same lens can be applied to the transition from teacher to school leader.

Curtin et al. (2016) posited three types of mentoring in social cognitive career theory mentoring. These three types of mentoring were identified as instructional mentoring, sponsorship, and expressive or psychosocial mentoring. Using the mentoring theory as described by Curtin et al. (2016), instructional mentoring could be found as part of the principal certification program as well as during early interactions between the mentor and mentee. Sponsorship was defined as active recommendation of the mentee to others (Curtin et al., 2016). Sponsorship of new principals could be identified as mentors including the mentee in professional meetings, introducing mentees to other professionals in the field, and advocating for the mentee (Curtin et al. 2016). Sponsorship would seem more common in mentor-doctoral candidate relationships. The final type of mentoring, expressive or psychosocial mentoring, may be the best fit for early career principal-mentor role. Expressive or psychosocial mentoring has been identified as providing encouragement and support. According to Curtin et al. (2016), this type of mentoring has generated self-efficacy and support that may be particularly important for early career principals.

Mentors can help guide early career principals by modeling reflective behavior and sound mental processes. "So not only do (early career principals) process information (they) also observe others and model their behavior" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 35). In fact, "mentoring

is a process that offers adult learner models to observe” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 35). For example, a veteran principal might model how she/he thinks about an ill-structured problem to illustrate the thought process of reflection on their actions in certain situations and thus “reflection becomes part of a continuous learning process” (Sergiovanni & Green, 2015, p. 5). Thus, social cognitive theory seems applicable to the mentoring of early career principals.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of first and second year principals involved in the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Project (AMP) in order to better understand the characteristics of an effective mentor-mentee relationship, how the mentoring experience aids in guiding new principals to develop skills in goal setting and collaboration, and how the participation in the mentoring experience impacts leadership growth.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the current research, the following questions were addressed:

1. What are some of the characteristics of an effective mentor-mentee relationship?
2. How does the mentoring experience guide new principals in the development of goal setting and collaborative skills?
3. How does participation in the mentoring experience impact leadership growth of new principals?

### **Research Design**

As leadership preparation faculty, an interest emerged relative to how beginning elementary and secondary principals and assistant principals interpret their mentoring experience and what meanings they attribute to this experience. A qualitative research design was chosen as this study focused on understanding the mentoring experience from the point of view of early career principals. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated qualitative research is “understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 15).

The research population consisted of a purposeful sample of six second and third-year principals enrolled in a Regional Professional Development Center (RPDC) mentoring program and working in the university service region. The researchers interviewed four elementary principals and two secondary principals at the end of their second year of participation in AMP, or had recently transitioned out of AMP. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and took place convenient to the participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each transcribed interview was supplemented with analytic memos designed to capture the richness of the experience, nonverbal cues, as well as various emotions expressed by the subject. Transcripts were coded and emergent themes explored. Each interview was treated as a case. Using a within and cross-case analysis, themes were identified emerging from the participants’ accounts of their mentoring experience (Kim, 2014). Validity was addressed by using multiple investigators and

coders. Each investigator coded the data separately and a consensus was reached on the interpretation of the data.

The research was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data was collected. Participants completed the approved Informed Consent prior to the interview. To maintain confidentiality participants were cautioned not to use the name of their school or district and not to identify their mentor by name. In the few cases where the school or mentor was mentioned by name, these identifiers were redacted.

### **Method**

Interviews were designed as semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews were those that gather specific information such as participant education level and background, numbers of teachers in the building, the principal's role (i.e., principal or assistant principal), and student demographics. The largest part of the interview was guided by a list of questions about the mentoring experience to be explored. The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to respond to the situation, to the emerging views of the participant, and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interview topics for all participants included the following: a) educational background and job prior to the principalship; b) proximity and availability of the mentor;

c) characteristics of a successful mentor-mentee relationship; d) description of a typical mentoring session; e) relationship developed with the mentor; f) the required length of two years in the mentoring program; g) the mentor's previous experience in a similar grade or school; h) guidance provided by your mentor with goal-setting and the modeling of collaboration; and, i) additional mentor-mentee relationship issues not addressed by prior topics.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. A purposeful sampling of the mentoring experience of first or second year principals in a university service region is not necessarily generalizable to other regions in the state or nation. In addition, a few of the principals had access to veteran principals in their district, other than their assigned mentor, which may have influenced the principal/mentor relationship.

### **Findings and Emergent Themes**

In examining the perspectives of first and second year principals involved in the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Project (AMP), four themes emerged relative to the impact of the mentoring project. The identified themes included: the prior experience of the mentor, the proximity and contact between the mentor and mentee, collaborative and reflective goal setting, and trust and relationship building.

#### **Prior Experience of the Mentor**

Mentoring is most often defined as a professional relationship in which an experienced person (the mentor) assists another (the mentee) in developing specific skills and knowledge that

will enhance the less-experienced person's professional and personal growth. Supported by this definition, the prior experience of the mentor assigned to the mentee was reported to be important in building a relationship. When referring to prior experience, one participant stated, "I do think it's important. I feel like if you want to really explain something to somebody, you have to walk a little bit just to have that experience...so to ask a question, it was real to me because I knew they were doing it or they had done so in the past—this was very beneficial and I think it's important."

Stressing the importance of prior experience, another participant agreed. "I think that the mentor I have has prior knowledge of our school system which really was beneficial as far as setting up goals and trying to meet our objectives. He has lots of experience and he knows what I would be dealing with my first year."

Experienced mentors can also offer tools they have used in their own practice as a means of professional growth for the novice leaders. Discussing teacher evaluations in her building, one participant described a process her mentor provided to address personnel needs, "he actually did this SWOT activity with me, I had never heard of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats...he did it with me and then I did it with my teacher evaluations. I was really excited to have something from my mentor that I could just turn around and use immediately." In addition to the SWOT analysis, the mentee described the use of conversation maps introduced to her by her mentor, "I am to rate myself on my emerging levels of competencies. I have never seen this before!"

One participant, who did not have a mentor with a similar background, voiced her desire to make more of a connection during the mentorship experience. "If I was working on something and if I had an elementary principal as my mentor, I think that it would have been much easier for her to share things with me rather than just research," reported the mentee. The mentor was a central office administrator, and in order to provide more experiential learning, she provided elementary school sites in her district for her mentees to visit. Talking about these visits, the mentee stated, "when I actually toured the buildings and met with those principals, I got way more out of talking with those elementary leaders than I did with conversations with my mentor. I shared things I did (with the principal) and we both learned from each other so I definitely walked away with things I could come back and implement right away."

### **Proximity and Contact between the Mentor and Mentee**

Proximity of the mentor was viewed as an important facet of the mentorship program. Participants reported that being able to actually visit the mentor on his/her campus and to meet face-to-face for consultation sessions helped the mentee address growth in leadership areas. As described by one participant, "I think proximity is crucial...it's easy to pick up the phone, but a lot of time--to really have those heart to heart conversations--I think you have to see someone face-to-face, rather than just a voice you hear."

Another participant, who was in the second year of the program, had been assigned a mentor who was located approximately 90 miles from her school. Although the mentee was able to travel to the mentor's district in order to participate in school-site visits, the travel time was perceived as being a negative factor of the program and the contact between the two "was harder

for me.” In year two, her assigned mentor was located much closer in proximity. She added, “proximity I think is very important...you know how busy everyone is...and with what you have to do right in front of you...if you have to travel a long way, or the mentor has to travel a long way, it’s difficult. I think face-to-face meetings are important. My first-year experience was not as meaningful as this year...and I think it was the proximity.”

Two of the participants were each assigned a mentor that was located within their own communities. One participant was assigned a retired educator that actually lived very near her school, so proximity was addressed in a positive manner. Describing her experience, she stated “if I had a question or concern, I could just call...and he would be right over if he could. He knows what it’s like to work in this district—he knows the pros and cons, so I think it’s good for us.” Another agreed in that he reported, “the mentor has been a huge help—and being near the community, he is familiar with the school district, so he has been fabulous...I think it’s important to get a mentor that understands the make-up of what you are dealing with.”

Finally, one participant felt that proximity would be beneficial due to the fact that the mentor might be able to spend more time with the mentee. As an example, he stated, “It wouldn’t have to be an all-day thing—maybe a couple of hours, but maybe the mentor could come and shadow the principal (the mentee) for an hour or two and then they could have a conversation—you don’t really have a routine as an administrator—things can pop up at any time.” The participant felt that spending time within his own building alongside his mentor, and then having time to talk about the day’s events, would be very helpful with his development of leadership skills.

### **Collaborative and Reflective Goal Setting**

For both the mentor and the mentee involved in the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Program, the expectation was that each would attend training to address goal setting and reflective dialogue. The training assisted with the process of generating and guiding conversations to cause reflection and growth, creating common language, while also helping to build relationships. Modeled after the New York City Leadership Academy in consultation with The Wallace Foundation and state departments of Kentucky, Delaware, and Missouri, a Leadership Performance Planning Worksheet was used to assist the mentee in the development of leadership skills and behaviors to meet the goals of leading and improving schools instructionally. The philosophy supporting this worksheet development was that new leaders, during their first years of leadership, should focus on the developing mastery of a subset of key leadership behaviors that have been found to develop the capacity to perform instructional leadership. The worksheet contained eight leadership dimensions including 1) Personal Behavior, 2) Resilience, 3) Communication, 4) Student Performance, 5) Situational Problem-Solving, 6) Learning, 7) Supervision of Staff, and 8) Management. During the training, the worksheet was reviewed in order for the mentor to assist the mentee in focusing on critical leadership areas to improve instruction in the context of their own school’s vision, mission, goals and challenges. The worksheet was then used to discuss strengths, weaknesses, and to record progress. From the planning, leadership goals were developed relative to the leadership dimensions.

Building on an established goal within the district, one participant selected the leadership dimension of Communication, focusing on knowing all staff members, clear and appropriate communication, and understanding cultural patterns in order to adjust his/her communication style. This novice principal was assigned to two separate buildings, one of which she had served as a teacher; the other she was challenged to get to know the staff. “Coming in, number 1 was to get to know all of the staff...one building I wasn’t familiar with, so that was something I had to really work through and get to know those teachers in order for us to have a trusting relationship...finding ways to unify our buildings.” To further her goal, which also led to year two of the program, a focus was made to not only enhance her communication with the staff but to also allow the staff to communicate with each other. In order to accomplish this, the new principal implemented collaborative processes to address the evaluation of programs and data collection, provided common lunch periods for grade level teachers to be together for 20-40 minutes daily and to switch classrooms so that all grade level teachers were located together within the building. In response to how her mentor assisted in her growth and development, she stated, “I think my mentor definitely helped me...by giving me an outside view.”

Being assigned as an assistant principal in a building with some challenges regarding discipline, another participant chose the leadership dimension of Management for her goal. Regarding her strength in this area, the mentee stated, “I have always considered myself as a strong disciplinarian, but I didn’t know if my views from prior experience could relate to this school system.” Guided by her mentor in reflective dialogue, they discussed a plan to be consistent without having to re-establish the code of conduct or discipline policies. By altering the steps within the hierarchy of the code of conduct, the assistant principal was able to see an increase in attendance and a decrease in suspensions. In her words, “the plan actually worked!”

Other participants described their work with the mentor in areas such as Student Performance and Supervision of Staff. By identifying strengths and weaknesses, the mentees were able to develop goals for growth, chart their progress and determine if their goals were met. A mentoring log was kept by both the mentor and mentee to document the number of hours working together, the type of interaction, and the topics and activities discussed relative to the selected leadership goals. These logs were submitted to the Administrator Mentoring Program to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the mentee/mentor experience.

### **Trust and Relationship Building**

A final theme that emerged from the study involved the area of trust and relationship building. Supported by the work involving the concept of trust, Tschannem-Moran (2014) and Tschannem-Moran & Hoy (1998, 2000) provided a definition based on five facets of trust. Trust is described as the willingness to be vulnerable based on one’s confidence in the other party’s benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence.

Relating to these five facets and the confidence that interactions and conversations would be protected between the mentee and mentor, several participants described how they could openly and honestly discuss school issues, where an outside perspective was not only welcome, but encouraged. As one participant stated, “there are just some issues that you don’t want to discuss in-house.” Adding to this thought, another participant stated, “if I have a question, then I

feel like I can ask my mentor and it stays right there between me and my mentor...I really appreciate that.”

As an example, one participant had some issues with the teacher evaluation process and the conversations required to address developmental supervision. “I had some issues here within our building that I just wanted somebody’s outside perspective on...it’s nice to have that person that is not necessarily in your building every day or even in your district to know the politics or the dynamics...just listening to the facts. So, we talked through a few things—about moving some staff members that I thought might need to happen. Going through the summative evaluations right now I am starting to have those conversations...and it was so nice to have his (mentor) input in this area...he really is committed to helping me in any way...and I feel like I have a true relationship with him, not just having a relationship with him because I have to.”

Relating to the idea of competence, another participant described how she worked with a mentor that was familiar with her district. “I could go to him for anything that we were struggling with, any problem that arises...I shoot him an email and he is very timely to respond...he has been in our shoes before and that’s what helps. He has been in the community and knows what is crucial for the job we are in and where we work. He understands everything we are going through. One day he visited and he was here over an hour and he just let me talk and he just sat there and listened, and then at the end, offered some things to try...it just felt good to get things off my chest and to talk.”

### **Final Thoughts Regarding the Mentoring Program**

Final thoughts reported by the mentees included the idea of having internal mentors as well as external. In larger districts, where there are numerous schools, participants also relied on the administrative teams within the districts. One participant noted, “Because we have a large elementary administrative team...if I had a question, I didn’t always go to my mentor. I went to someone within my district...I had seven other people that I could call or email...I could beg, borrow and steal from them.”

Feedback from the participants also addressed the length of the program. Focusing on the required two years of mentoring, one participant stated, “I like the two years, with the first year used to implement my plan. I don’t think it should be a one year program because that second year is when you see the results and then you can make changes in those plans to make them better. You can also build a system across with all the people that are in the program and communicate and talk to other principals...and that table that has been built for communication is a major plus...I really enjoyed the program and it has been beneficial to me.” Another participant also addressed the two years responding, “I think two years is adequate. Because the first year you are so overwhelmed that you really don’t know what you are doing. By the second year you kind of have your feet under you and you feel a little more confident on what you are doing, so I think two years is adequate to build relationships within your district.” A third participant felt the program could possibly be extended stating that in a third, fourth, or fifth year, members in the program might still continue to have conversations via phone calls or additional developmental meetings to address professional growth.

Finally, participants voiced their overall perceptions. Relating to the benefit, a participant stated, “I have had a very positive experience...he (my mentor) has been so helpful and wonderful...I mean when we had to do action planning, he helped me to do that and again, anytime I had problems, I could email him.” Another participant noted, “The program was great...I am always big about making connections with other administrators. I think that is very important and just growing professionally...getting out there and seeing what other schools are doing...building those relationships.” A third participant stated, “I think the program has been beneficial. I have enjoyed working with my mentors...anytime I had a question or couldn’t make it to a meeting, they would be more than happy to make accommodations and meet me at different times or come by and help and I couldn’t ask for more than that. They were very helpful with my plan and reaching our goals in our school system. They have been wonderful as another support for me with my experience as an administrator.”

### **Discussion**

All in all, the participants reported a positive experience as they were involved in the Missouri Administrator Mentoring Program. Participants indicated that a good mentor-mentee relationship is characterized by having a mentor that has similar current or past experience and in close proximity. They felt that having a similar experience and availability provided an understanding of their particular situation and facilitated face-to-face meetings. Participants believed that an outside view helped them understand their role in goal setting and collaboration skills. The outside view promoted more honest communication as they sometimes struggled with a particular problem. It was important to the participants that the mentor is available and understands the dynamics and challenges of early career principals. This concept seemed particularly important in small school districts with only one elementary, middle school, and high school. Larger districts with multiple schools provided more opportunities to interact with more experienced colleagues in similar schools. Participants may have constructed the meanings of their relationships differently, but were consistent in their positive views of the relationship they had developed with their mentor. While they valued their mentor-mentee relationship the participants were also consistent in their view that two-years is enough time for them to develop their abilities and skills to be successful in their new roles.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

While not necessarily generalizable to other regions and other mentoring programs, this study does provide some implications and recommendations. First, mentoring of early school principals by experienced school principals was found to be profoundly important. Results indicated it may be best to have a mentor that is not employed by the district. All six participants in this study had external mentors and were consistent in their belief that having a mentor outside the district was positive in that it provided an ‘outside view.’ Respondents also maintained school districts should support the professional development of early career principals even after the mentoring term is complete. Results from this research led the researchers of this study to contend that Principal Preparation Programs should include instruction to prepare future leaders to work with mentors.

This study focused on the current Missouri model for mentoring new principals. A new model, currently in the early stages of implementation, will provide additional support and multiple years of contact for new principals in the State of Missouri. The Missouri Leadership Development System (MLDS) centers on a mission to develop highly effective school principals in Missouri by creating a leadership development system to ensure excellent school leadership in service to all students (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). As a recommendation for further study, the transition into this new leadership model might be of interest to both educators in the K-12 setting as well as those in principal preparation programs to determine the effectiveness of the new mentoring model.

### **Conclusion**

Several themes emerged from this qualitative research into early career principals mentoring experience. The participants believed that it is important that the mentor be currently employed or have experience in a similar grade level. One participant emphasized this by stating “I feel like if you want to really explain something to somebody, you have to walk a little bit just to have that experience...” Participants found it important that the mentor be relatively close in proximity to their school to improve communication and interaction. For example, one participant stated “My first-year experience was not as meaningful as this year...and I think it was the proximity.” Collaborative and reflective goal setting also emerged from the data. One middle school participant had experience as an elementary teacher, but not secondary experience. She expressed concerns about student discipline. Guided by her mentor in reflective dialog she began to understand the district student conduct code and developed a plan of action. As she stated, “the plan actually worked!”

The final emergent theme was the importance of trust building in the mentor-mentee relationship. Participants were consistent in their view that trust was essential. Several participants emphasized this point by stating “if I have a question, then I feel like I can ask my mentor and it stays right there between (us).” Another participant stated, “there are just some issues that you don’t want to discuss in-house.” Finally, participants believed that a two-year experience is a valuable and adequate time frame for the mentoring process to be successful.

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