

ILLUMINATING PRINCIPALS' TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING DURING
COACHING EXPERIENCES

by

Diana Barrera, M.A.

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
with a Major in School Improvement
December 2019

Committee Members:

Melissa A. Martinez, Chair

Barry Aidman

James Koschoreck

Fernando Valle

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this labor of love to my parents, Cecilia and Alfredo Barrera.
Through your example, you taught me everything I needed to know
to dream big, believe in myself, and make it happen!

I learned:

Determination

Dedication

Persistence

Resilience

Kindness

Empathy

Joy

&

LOVE

from your example.

I love and miss you dearly!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my sisters (Patty and Frenchie) and their families: Thank you for your unending love and support throughout this entire journey! You always knew I could and would.

Dr. Sharon Doughty: Thank you for standing up for me and believing in me.

Sheila Collazo: I will be forever grateful for all that I have learned under your leadership and guidance!

My dearest friends, Blanca, Dede, Donna, Iris, Rosemary and Theresa: Your friendship has carried me through the good times and the bad. I love each of you!

My KISD Board of Trustees and Jami: Thank you for your unending support and encouragement!

My Executive Staff, Melanie, Casner, Curtis, Gunner and Shawn: Your individual and collective energy fueled me to get to the finish line! You guys are amazing and make work not feel like work! Hugs all around!

My Editor, Jeff King: Every. Detail. Matters. Thanks! I will always be grateful for your friendship, guidance, support and skills!

My Dissertation Chair, Dr. Martinez, my mera mera: You are an absolute inspiration! Thank you for reading my words over, and over, and over to get me to this finish line. When I grow up, I want to be just like you!

My Committee, Dr. Aidman, Dr. Koschoreck, and Dr. Valle: I appreciate your support of my work and helping me to make what was a distant dream a reality!

My Dean and my friend, Dr. O'Malley: I will forever be energized by your leadership and friendship!

Cohort 15: Each of you has inspired me to get to the finish line. The time we shared together will forever be remembered with irreverent laughter and love!

My daughters, Gabi and Tina: Raising both of you is the biggest accomplishment of my life, by far! I will always love you from here to eternity, and back! The 3M-4 Ever!

My husband, Michael Ugarte: You are my everything! Thank you for your unending love, support, encouragement, and snacks to get me through to the end. I love you more!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
NCLB.....	No Child Left Behind
ESSA.....	Every Student Succeeds Act
TEA.....	Texas Education Agency

ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenological study was designed to examine the lived experiences of principals who utilized coaching as an approach for their own professional development and transformational learning. The following research questions guided the study: 1) What are the lived experiences of principals engaging in coaching for their own transformational learning? 2) How does the coaching experience contribute to their own transformational learning? School improvement research affirms that leaderships skills, knowledge, and attributes of principals impact organizational effectiveness (Hogan, 2007) and student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005). However, school improvement strategies tend to predominately target building capacity of teachers rather than school leaders (Bryk et al., 2010). There is a need for a better understanding of how coaching is utilized as a professional development tool for principals. Qualitative data from interviews, participant reflective journal entries were collected and analyzed to illuminate principals' experiences with coaching. The key findings in this study were: 1) Coaching relationships built on trust, authentic interactions, and with a person-centered focus create conditions for transformational learning; 2) Coaching sessions that intentionally focus on reflection, are question-driven, and provide an accountability-based structure promote transformational learning experiences; and 3) Principals who have experienced transformational learning from coaching as a professional development strategy are more likely to create transformational learning cultures at the schools they lead.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This study on illuminating the coaching experience of principals was anchored in my personal experiences as an educational leader. The administrative positions I have held at both the campus and district levels provided me opportunities to participate in multiple facets of the coaching relationship. I can attest to the potential for educators to engage in transformational learning through the phenomenon of coaching because I have witnessed its impact on my own career, both as a principal being coached and as a coach of principals.

My first experience with coaching came during my tenure as a campus principal in a large urban district. The school I proudly led was one of several district campuses receiving federal funds to support underserved populations. All the principals receiving these funds were required to meet regularly with a district executive director whose task was to provide us with guidance and coaching. The content of these meetings, presented to us as coaching sessions, was primarily centered on analyzing campus data. The executive director opened each session with a strengths-weaknesses assessment she labeled “glows” and “grows.” This format provided her the opportunity to review with each of us our pertinent data—attendance, discipline, assessment and benchmark scores—and offer plenty of suggestions for improvement.

The executive director appeared to have a strong personal interest in building collegial relationships on each campus and would often create agenda items for each meeting to incorporate this passion. She regularly shared her past difficulties with establishing positive relationships with her staff as a principal. Once she learned how important relationships were to the working environment, she focused intently on them.

Subsequently, she explained that relationship building became something at which she excelled. She described how she would spend portions of her summer vacation preparing birthday cards for each person on her staff, complete with a glittery pencil or stickers, and always accompanying her signature with a happy face. She emphasized how small efforts like this made a big difference in building relationships with staff.

As a result of this initial experience, I viewed coaching as an activity and not a process, one that centered on compliance rather than on leadership development. The only reflection I did at the conclusion of each meeting was to schedule the next one on my calendar and carry on with the rest of my day. Although I seldom gave our discussions another thought, I remained intrigued, considering coaching as a useful tool for educational leadership, often learning more about it by reading leadership journal articles and attending conference sessions.

My next coaching experience was very different. I had been promoted to a district level leadership position and was undergoing training to become a certified coach. I was being trained to provide support to a group of principals in much the same way as my previous executive director had attempted with me. While I have always enjoyed learning new things, I was not thrilled that these coaching courses were taking place on weekends. Little did I know that I would experience coaching in a different way that I had experienced it as a principal, one that challenged me to reflect deeply on myself as a person and as an educator.

This training period was organized around practicing coaching skills rather than on analyzing progress data. As a part of a group of trainees, we spent much of the time practicing our coaching skills on one another. We gave each other feedback on coaching

as we took turns assuming the roles of coach, coachee, and observer. I found my enthusiasm growing more with each session, as I was eager to practice my coaching skills and be coached. Our coaching conversations and practice sessions were centered on getting to the underlying issue of a specific experience. The coach would ask probing questions about my thinking and my decisions, guiding me to figure out why I was having difficulties with a particular issue. Through this process, I began to name my “gremlins,” the subconscious thoughts I often had that would randomly appear and affect my beliefs about myself, the language I used, and inevitably, my actions. These conversations were so impactful to my practice as an administrator that I began contacting my classmates outside of our sessions for help or advice when I encountered a difficult situation during the week. I began noticing that the process of coaching expanded my ways of thinking, believing, behaving and being. It became something much more than having conversations about numbers.

I share these experiences with coaching to provide the context and my positionality to this study. While I fully acknowledge that the latter experience I had with coaching was transformational, my intent in conducting this research was to uncover and illuminate the experiences of principals studied to determine how they experienced coaching, and to distill how their experiences with coaching might contribute to their own professional development and transformational learning.

Background of the Study

The need for a better understanding of how coaching as professional development might positively contribute to principals’ development and learning stems from two primary contextual factors. First, there is the recognition of the pivotal role school

leaders play in student learning (e.g., Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Bass, 1985; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Day, 2008; Leithwood, Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Shirrell, 2016). For example, in a six-year study supported by the Wallace Foundation and conducted in 180 schools in 43 school districts, Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) established the connection between leadership and student learning, underscoring the importance of principal leadership in school improvement. Additionally, Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) liken leadership to a vessel or catalyst for positive outcomes in schools, further emphasizing the need to support and grow principals in every aspect of their job to ensure they are skilled and capable of leading the campus to improve student outcomes.

Second, the job requirements and expectations of the principal have significantly increased in number and in complexity over the last two decades. Besides the traditional requirements mandated by local, state, and federal policies, principals are now expected to develop organizations with collaborative cultures, increase teaching and learning capacities, ultimately leading to positive learning environments, and student outcomes (Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). In many ways, today's principals are the educational equivalent to corporate executive officers in the business world. Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (as cited in The Wallace Foundation, 2010) observed:

Our principals today, I think, are absolutely CEOs. They have to manage people. They have to be first and foremost instructional leaders. They have to manage multi-million-dollar budgets. They have to manage facilities. They have to work with the community. The demands and the stresses on principals have never been

greater. (p. 22)

The principal is, in many ways, expected to be the campus change agent, well versed and skilled in transformational leadership (Fullan, 2002; Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane, & Brown, 2005) playing a pivotal role in student achievement (e.g., Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Bass, 1985; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Day, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Shirrell, 2016). These additional expectations have increased the demands of the job. Bolman and Deal (2013) argue that principals must constantly “reframe” (p. 355) leadership to transform ineffective practices to effective ones that contribute to school improvement, namely by collaborating with stakeholders and reflecting on current systems and practices on a regular basis.

Darling-Hammond, (2010) contends that there is a perception that educational leaders are ill-prepared to lead our schools and improve student performance. Principal professional development is viewed as the remedy for this lack of preparation (e.g., Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Bass, 1985; Fullan; 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Day, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Shirrell, 2016) to ultimately improve student outcomes. Research suggests that professional development is key to helping “novice principals . . . improve and broaden their portfolio of skills” in order to place them “on a path to make a difference, stay on the job, and become highly accomplished leaders who use their expertise to affect successful teaching and learning” (Kearney, 2010, p. 18). Conger and Benjamin (1999) suggest that professional development is also critical for current leaders to share their accumulated knowledge and skills, as well as to gain new knowledge and skills that are practical and can be implemented immediately to improve practice. They identify four professional development goals for leaders that include:

developing individual leadership effectiveness; enhancing career transition into leadership positions; instilling the vision, values, and mission of the organization; and developing skills and knowledge to implement long-term strategic objectives.

Despite these positive suggestions, other feedback on the professional development available to educational leaders has been critical and labeled as “fragmented, incoherent, not sustained, lacking in rigor, and not aligned with state standards for effective administrative practice” (Talley, 2011, p. 34). Collett (2015) attests “Because contexts for teaching are constantly changing, preparation for teaching requires professional development that is discursive as well as dialogic and reflective” (p. 269). Moreover, there has been scant professional development for principals that is differentiated to meet their individual professional development needs to grow their capacity to be “educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, and disciplinarians” (Fisher, 2011, p. 95). Considering that principals have varying levels of proficiency and need different skills based on the context, a one-size-fits-all approach to their professional development will not effectively nor consistently impact and improve leadership (Conger & Benjamin, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Additionally, for school improvement to be sustained, implemented change must be deeply rooted, focused on building the capacity of individuals and teams in the organization (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010). Principals must have the training and support needed to hone leadership skills, the self-efficacy to implement new practices, skills, and policies, and be “committed to and skilled in the change process” (Fullan, 2016, p. 83). Without these skills and self-efficacy, principals will likely not have the capacity to lead their campus through change that is effective and sustainable. The multi-

faceted job of the principal continues to change, given external mandates and internal requirements.

Educational policy has recognized this shortcoming in principal preparation and begun to call for changes in the development of educational leaders. For example, the recent reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), has instituted improvement strategies for schools and school systems. As a result, principals' professional development is moving from a strongly encouraged priority to a requirement as a way to prepare administrators to navigate between external reform demands and internal school needs (Collett, 2015; Weick, 2009). During the reauthorization process, the United States Department of Education (USDE) required state education agencies to reach out to various stakeholders for their input to inform the development of ESSA (Terry & Wood, 2017). The Texas Education Agency (TEA), responding to this mandate, sent out surveys to collect data from their primary stakeholders. Their resulting analysis suggested that the state's leadership development efforts were lacking. They declared that "[p]rincipal support and supervision has been a low-priority in both funding and human resource allocation in the past, with less than 5 percent of Title II funds being spent on school leadership" (Texas Education Agency, n.d., para. 1).

One notable response to this dearth of development has been an increased interest in coaching to provide needed support to educational leaders. Texas' Education Commissioner, Mike Morath, specifically endorsed the need to provide ongoing coaching and support for principals, calling for the state to:

Improve the effectiveness of its principals by clearly defining the role and expectations of their principal supervisors to focus their time and energy on

supporting and growing principals as instructional leaders. In large districts, reducing the span of control by adding to the number of principal supervisors can increase the time and opportunity for *personalized coaching of principals*. (Texas Education Agency, n.d., italics added)

This call for support is evidenced in the five-year Strategic Priorities for Texas (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Texas Strategic Plan.

The research literature lends credence to the Texas education officials, recognizing coaching as one of the most significant approaches to the professional development of executives and leaders (American Management Association, 2008; Cooper & Conley, 2011; Gray, 2006; Reiss, 2015; Schein, 2010). In developing the strategic priorities, Commissioner Morath and stakeholders identified the professional development of principals in the first of four priorities to improve education for Texas children. Koestenbaum (2002) postulates that coaching is “the missing link in making strategies work” (p. 201). This model of professional development has been found to

improve practices and organizational outcomes (Fullan, 2016) as it is embedded within the scope of the job and does not require additional travel in order to access specialized training.

In terms of the education field, coaching provides principals and superintendents a viable approach to their own professional development that is customized to meet their needs (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). It engages leaders in acquiring the skills they need to become self-aware of the effects their intentional and unintentional language and actions have on individuals and organizations (Aguilar, 2013; Harris, 1993; Schon, 1991; Sherman & Freas, 2004). Noted school improvement researchers Fullan and Knight (2011) also underscore the importance of principal coaching as a leadership tool and strategy, stipulating that “many comprehensive reform efforts will fall short” (p. 50) without principals engaging in coaching as an approach to their own professional development.

Reflective practice is a large part of the coaching process, which Pettit (2006) describes as “the art of including yourself in your approach to your work, and acknowledging the influence of your position, assumptions and worldview on your understandings and actions” (p. 76). A culture in which reflection is common practice for students, teachers, and administrators leads to effective school improvement (Barnett & Mahoney, 2006) and has the potential to impact transformational learning (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019). Common coaching reflective practices include an organized communication structure (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliot, & Cravens, 2009) by processing experiences through coaching conversations and journal writing (Aguilar, 2013). Collaborative reflection helps teams refine their practices and

course-correct when needed.

Problem Statement

Researchers suggest enhancing the quality of school leaders to be an effective educational reform strategy and have found increased academic achievement to be an outcome of high quality leadership (e.g., Bass, 1985; Fullan; 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Day, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Shirrell, 2016). In short, when leadership improves, student achievement improves. Yet, as Shipman, Topps, and Murphy (1998) declare “the professional development needs of school leaders have been ignored or undervalued for far too long” (p. 2). Typically, principals attend professional development sessions designed for large groups that take place away from their campus. These sessions are generalized to meet the overall needs of the whole group, lacking the specifically and individualization that principals need to improve their practice.

Coaching has been a productive professional development strategy for the corporate world (Reiss, 2015; Duncan & Stock, 2010; & Silver et al., 2009), and has become a more utilized improvement strategy for school leaders. However, as researchers Fletcher and Mullen (2012) point out, the coaching of principals remains “scantily researched” (p. 8) despite it being a practical way to support leaders. Wise and Jacobo (2010) argue, “The concept of a coach spending time with the principal, to assist her/him in clarifying goals and delineating actions, is an idea whose time has arrived” (p. 162). There is mounting evidence that quality leadership in schools leads to improvement in student performance (Louis et al., 2004). This research is significant to school improvement and how educational leaders plan for and participate in developing their own leadership skills to impact student outcomes. I believe that the notion of

developing teachers to impact student achievement in their classrooms is commonly known and has long been a strategy for school improvement. The notion that developing principals can impact student achievement in schools has a further reach and has the potential to affect school improvement at a much larger scale, establishing the need to prioritize the professional development of school leaders (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). Although it is known that principal coaching impacts quality leadership, what is not known is the type of coaching principals receive and how their experience utilizing coaching as a form of professional development impacts their own transformational learning.

Purpose and Significance of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of principals in Central Texas who utilized coaching as an approach for their own professional development and understand how being recipients of coaching contributes to their transformational learning, if at all. In doing so, this study responded to the need for professional development opportunities for principals that are job-embedded and differentiated to meet their specific needs. Drawing on a descriptive phenomenological approach, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of principals engaging in coaching for their own professional development?
2. How does the coaching experience contribute to their own transformational learning?

According to the National Staff Development Council (Sparks & Hirsch, 2000), the correlation between leadership and student achievement underscores the need for

professional development for principals that is relevant to their needs and is on-going and embedded within the daily work of principals. This research study contributes to leadership scholarship in the following ways:

1. Illuminate the phenomenon of coaching, as experienced by principals
2. Illuminate the phenomenon of coaching, through the lens of a coach (the researcher)
3. Highlight the successful aspects of coaching, as experienced by principals
4. Reveal aspects of coaching that need refining, based on the experiences of principals
5. Identify how coaching contributes to the transformational learning of principals

This research study serves to inform principals, central office administrators and superintendents considering coaching as an approach to principal professional development and transformational learning. Additionally, this research adds to coaches' understanding of how principals experience coaching and can serve to influence how they coach principals.

Brief Overview of Theoretical Framework

Kouzes and Posner (2011) posit that transformation begins with the development of the self, based on the belief that learning “results in a change in how we see ourselves” (Malik, 2016, p. 49). Coaching, then, can be viewed as a transformational process, since it facilitates the engagement of principals in reflective practices, thus providing a space for them to see their behaviors through a new lens. The theoretical framework utilized in this study was adapted from Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000) and Isopahkala-Bouret (2008),

converging on transformational learning as a process rather than an outcome (Ultanir, 2012). This type of learning occurs when participants experience a change in their beliefs, attitudes and perspectives, which result in new leadership behaviors (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019; Mezirow, 2000).

These trajectories culminate in personal and professional growth of principals via a change in beliefs and actions, connecting what they know (about themselves and the world around) to new knowledge and new meanings (Naylor & Keogh, 1999). Learning becomes “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). When participants’ beliefs, attitudes, or perspectives change, and when they become more open to change itself, they have undergone transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000; Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019).

Brief Overview of Methods

I selected qualitative research as the method to use for this study, as it provides a view of the world, as seen by the researcher, through interpretation of data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Since phenomenology places value on how individuals experience the world and experiences themselves (van Manen, 2016), it was appropriate to use this method to explore how principals’ engaged with the phenomenon of coaching “directly and immediately” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79), in order to distill the “essential structure” (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015, p. 431) of coaching for transformational learning. I chose transcendental phenomenology for this research study to describe the essence of how individuals experienced coaching and how these descriptions highlight the transformational nature of coaching. According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental

phenomenology is “a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (p. 49), and not how we interpret them to be. I obtained knowledge of the phenomenon through two interviews, reflective journal entries (principals) after each interview, my journal and provided thick, rich descriptions of the experiences of the principals in my analysis. Utilizing the process of epoche to bracket my experiences with coaching, I then followed the process of reduction, horizontalization, imaginative variation before synthesis of meanings and essences in the themes identified to capture the essence of coaching, from the perspective of the participants in this study.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One of this dissertation provides an overview of my personal experience being coached as a principal and as a coach of principals. The background research on school improvement and reform strategies lays the foundation for the study. These sections discuss the role of the principal in student learning, the increasingly complex role of the principal, the professional development of principals, and coaching as a professional development approach for principals. The problem statement and purpose of the study and its significance are explained, followed by a brief overview of the theoretical framework and methods. The chapter concludes with key terms.

Chapter Two begins with a theoretical examination of transformational learning, which serves as the guiding framework for this study. A detailed literature review covering the historical perspective of school improvement and coaching as an approach to professional development and learning of principals follows. The chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of current gaps in the related literature.

The methodology of this study is described in Chapter Three, discussing qualitative research design, site and participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness methods, limitations, ethical considerations and chapter summary. Findings of this proposed study are addressed in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, the discussion, conclusion, and recommendations are explicated.

Key Terms

Coaching: An approach to professional development that provides leaders with opportunities to “have dialogue, seek advice, rehearse, and question key instructional leadership decisions and actions” (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, p. 49).

Constructivism: The central principles of this approach are that learners can only make sense of new situations in terms of their existing understanding. Learning involves an active process in which learners construct meaning by linking new ideas with their existing knowledge" (Naylor & Keogh, 1999, p. 93).

Job-embedded professional development: Professional development within the scope of an individual’s work.

Lived experiences: The essence or common meaning of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology: A research design strategy that attempts to provide a common meaning to the “lived experience” of several subjects who experience a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016).

Principal: The leader of a school.

Professional development and learning: Activities that focus on supporting principals as they acquire or refine practices related to the full spectrum of leadership duties

and expectations held for principals, refine key skills such as capacity-building and lead the principal into personal renewal (Houle 2006; Drago-Severson 2009).

Reflection: Thinking deeply and critically to understand what we do and why we do it (Rolfe, Jasper, & Freshwater, 2011).

Self-efficacy: “Beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1986, p. 3).

Transformational learning: “Learning that not only increases knowledge, but more importantly, leads to deep and pervasive shifts in the learner’s perspective and understanding” (Pomow, Popp, Broderick, Drago-Severson and Kegan, 1998, p. 1).

School improvement: An approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994).

Reform strategies: Practices that contribute to change within schools and school systems that result in sustainable school improvement.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although educational research tends to emphasize the importance of the role of the classroom teacher in students' academic success (e.g., Bernstein-Yamashiro, & Noam, 2013; Fan, 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2006), the potential impact of the principal on student success cannot be understated (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Moore, 2009). In fact, Briggs, Davis and Cheney (2012) suggest that improving students' academic achievement cannot happen without effective school leadership, declaring that, "until we have outstanding leadership in every school, we will not achieve effectiveness—nor significantly improved student-learning outcomes—at scale" (p. 3). Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) demonstrably agree with Briggs et al., claiming they have yet to find "a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (p. 9). Gorham (2008) enumerates this assertion, suggesting that, when the personal performance of leaders increased by 49%, there is at least a 22% increase in academic achievement. In short, school principals are key to school reform and, without effective leadership, there is little chance for sustained academic improvement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Efforts focused specifically on improving principals' leadership skills effectiveness through professional development have thus become a priority in school improvement and education reform.

This chapter presents a review of literature on how professional development focused on coaching as a means of providing transformative learning experiences for school administrators might increase principals' leadership potential. Resources for this review were culled from multiple electronic databases (ProQuest, EBSCO, JSTOR)

accessed through the Alkek Library on the campus of Texas State University. The keywords used for the review included a combination of two or more of the following terms: coaching, coaching models, principal, professional development, educational leadership, and transformational learning. This review details three distinct themes that emerged from the relevant literature—the impact of hyper governability on principal learning, coaching as an approach to professional development, and the professional learning of principals—as well as the concept of transformational learning, which serves as the study’s theoretical framework. The chapter concludes with skepticism identified by researchers who doubt the effectiveness of coaching as a professional development strategy.

Hyper-governability and Principal Learning

The current focus of school improvement reform continues to reflect the sentiment of hyper-governability driving the broader educational policy landscape (O’Malley & Aguilar, 2010). Hyper-governability derives from the standards movement and the overwhelming concern it places on student test scores. This concern impacts the professional development trajectories for both teachers and principals. For teachers, skill development becomes the acquisition of resources needed to teach students the specific knowledge and skills that were tested (Carbonaro & Covay, 2010). For principals, more value is placed on strategies that will directly impact the quality of classroom instruction rather than on strategies or activities that will impact their leadership (Schechter & Schaked, 2017). This accountability-driven focus has made the principal’s job more complex, which threatens leadership effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2016; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2005; McCarty, 2007). Scholars argue that

the current standards environment “leaves little room for the school’s values, goals, and capacities” which inevitably “makes it even more complicated for the school principal to negotiate external pressures with local preferences and abilities” (Schechter & Schaked, 2017, p. 244).

The beginnings of hyper-governability can be traced back to the publishing of *A Nation at Risk*, the national report that negatively characterized the country’s educational system as “a rising tide of mediocrity” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Tracked back to the publishing of this study, the overwhelming focus on accountability and test scores has complicated the role of the principal. As a result, accountability at all levels increased, and the top priority for principals became engaging in accountability and compliance activities such as data analysis, monitoring, and reporting (Accountability Monitoring and Guidance Resources, n.d.; No Child Left Behind, 2001).

The passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) at the turn of the twenty-first century increased expectations for principals to improve student achievement as measured by standardized tests and other data-based metrics, which were disseminated throughout communities as school report cards (West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). During this time professional development opportunities for principals centered on analyzing these metrics rather than on leadership strategies and practices that could enhance their own leadership styles and skill sets. This myopic focus on test scores resulted in unintended outcomes for states, districts and schools. For example, scholars argue that the unrealistic high stakes testing goals resulted in more waivers than actual progress in reform for states, districts and schools (Fullan, 2016). These waivers negatively

impacted students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students of color, students with special needs, and second-language learners (Smyth, 2008). The specific reform policies intended to enact positive change within the school community may have weakened the morale and resolve of stakeholders, doing little to help build the capacity of leaders and teachers to improve organizational and student outcomes (Fullan, 2006).

Another reform initiative, the 2009 *Race to the Top*, also failed to deliver on its promises to adopt new, rigorous standards and assessments, build systems to measure growth and success of students, recruit and retain quality teachers and principals, and dramatically improve failing schools (United States Department of Education, 2015). The emphasis placed on data systems to track student progress and improve teacher and principal effectiveness by linking student test scores to staff evaluations did not have the results expected (Ponticell, 2016). Perhaps learning from these two policy reforms, the more recent Federal Blueprint suggests a strategy tailored to capacity building and growth models rather than more traditional accountability-based consequences such as identifying failures and applying sanctions (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This model shifts the focus from identifying deficits to building on strengths (of teachers and principals), which also requires a shift in how we think about and engage in school improvement and reform. When educational leaders are obliged to focus on compliance with accountability mandates, the commitment to the real work of purposefully engaging in the process of continuous improvement of teaching and learning suffers. Alvoid and Black (2014) posit changes in the principalship:

The job of a modern-day principal has transformed into something that would be almost unrecognizable to the principals of the 1960's, 1970s and 1980s. The

concept of the principal as a building manager has given way to a model where the principal is an aspirational leader, a team builder, a coach and an agent of visionary change. (p. 1)

Michael Fullan, seeing the importance of coaching asserts, “without coaching, many comprehensive reform efforts will fall short” (Fullan & Knight, 2011, p. 50).

Coaching as an Approach to Principal Learning

Leadership coaching has long been popular in the business world and is also gaining in popularity in the education world as a successful way to develop leaders. Coaches who have received specific training in providing feedback, support and problem-solving through questioning techniques and reflective practices are hired from within an organization or externally (Reiss, 2007). This process of developing leaders in a confidential setting is being widely used to develop principals of schools. The quality and type of professional development for principals is critical to effective school improvement (Kimball, Heneman III, & Milanowski, 2007). Empirical research indicates that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contributes to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). This direct correlation between leadership and student achievement underscores the need for professional development for principals that is relevant to their individual needs and embedded within their daily work, according to the National Staff Development Council (Sparks & Hirsch, 2000). Professional support for teachers can be garnered through mentoring and coaching. The difference between the two is that mentoring is achieved through guiding the less knowledgeable through sharing experiences, whereas coaching is a learning process, facilitating inquiry and discovery to learn about the world around

them (Hammack, 2010; Reiss, 2007). Mentors tell what has worked and coaches ask questions to lead the coachee to create new possibilities through new learning. Coaching requires extensive or expert knowledge about coaching, and mentoring requires expert knowledge about the content (Whitmore, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the focus was on coaching.

Coaching is an approach to principal learning and professional development that addresses specific individual needs through engaging in scheduled dialogue, on a regular basis, with a person who is trained to facilitate such important conversations with educational leaders. Anderson and Turnbull (2016) support regularly scheduled conversations between principal and their coach or supervisor as a way to develop the leadership skills and capacity of principals, declaring “it’s not sit down and have one meeting and be evaluated with feedback for next year because it’s an all-the-time conversation” (p. 36). Celoria and Hemphill (2014) proclaim, “We are persuaded that knowledge develops as one engages in dialogue with others” (p. 73). Psencik (2011) propounded that leadership coaching for principals provides differentiated and focused support to develop and apply leadership skills to “help leaders change behaviors, build confidence, and find courage” (p. 13) to lead. It focuses on improving the ability of the principal to provide leadership for student success by working within Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. Deep learning that occurs through the coach-guided reflective practice enables and empowers leaders to expand their own learning by co-constructing knowledge in much the same way as teachers encourage their students to do in the classroom (Collett, 2015; Wise & Jacobo, 2010). This co-constructive work between coaches and principals includes activities that are relevant, meaningful and

purposeful, which provides a reciprocal process of personal and professional growth and development (Honig & Ikemoto, 2008). The power of coaching as a professional development strategy lies within the reciprocity of dialoguing about experience between the principal and coach. Upon reflection, the experiences of the past, present and future intersect to iteratively construct meaning of one's understanding of self, self-efficacy and leadership ability.

Research from the Wallace Foundation (2013) suggests that improving school leadership is one of the most critical priorities for effective school reform. Coaching has a compelling impact on the ability of school administrators, and thus, the ability to transform schools (e.g., Finn et al., 2007; Grant et al., 2009; Wise & Jacobo, 2010; James-Ward, 2011). According to Knight (2009), the process of supporting and growing principals through leadership coaching is seen as a process for helping principals become comfortable and successful in their role as a leader. Lasting organizational change is believed to be the outcome of leadership coaching:

To achieve extraordinary, external results, we must focus on developing and sustaining individual, team, and organizational behaviors through improved personal relationships. Leadership coaching builds the organizational capability to achieve those results by strengthening those skills, one leader at a time. (Reiss, 2007, p. 19)

Jim Knight (2011) opines about coaching as a partnership and the importance of building a level of comfort between coach and in the case of this article, a teacher. He shares seven principles that are an integral part of a partnership between a coach and a teacher, identifying that those being coached will not be as inclined to learn, unless they have a

certain level of comfort with their coach. One can extrapolate that the same principles of coaching also pertain to the relationship between the coach and a building principal. The following seven partnership principles describe a theory of interaction that is used by coaches:

1. Equality: both partners make decisions together
2. Choice: principals choose their coaching goals
3. Voice: conversation between coach and principal should be open and candid
4. Reflection: pleasure is derived from reflecting on learning
5. Dialogue: the goal is to discuss together and come up with the best idea (in a humble way)
6. Praxis: applying new learning of knowledge and skills
7. Reciprocity: the outcome of an authentic partnership - shared learning

While principal coaching is not a “silver bullet” (Ravitch, 2010), it can be effective in transforming schools by transforming the leadership of principals:

Coaching is a form of professional development that brings out the best in people, uncovers strengths and skills, builds effective teams, cultivates compassion, and builds emotionally resilient educators. Coaching at its essence is the way that human beings and individuals have always learned best. (Aguilar, 2013, p. 6)

The coaching relationship between coaches and principals is a reflective and thought-provoking process that inspires personal and leadership development (Kee, Anderson, Dearing, Harris, & Shuster, 2010), and provides an organized manner of providing feedback to principals to improve leadership (Goldring et al., 2009). Providing feedback to principals is necessary for building leadership skills and changing behaviors in the

workplace (Goff et al., 2014). Feedback and reflective practice embedded within coaching makes it one of the most significant approaches to the professional development of executives and leaders (Aguilar, 2013; American Management Association, 2008; Carraway & Young, 2015; Collett, 2015; Estrella-Henderson & Jessop, 2015; Gray 2006; Huff, Preston, & Goldring, 2013; Schein, 2010), thus affirming the use of coaching as a professional development approach for principals. Researchers (Allison, 2011; Farver, 2014; Psencik, 2011) have concluded reflection and coaching provide individualized learning that principals need to attend to the multitudinous demands and challenges they face daily. Robertson (2008) states, “Coaching establishes a framework for the development of collaborative action research processes that lead to personal, professional, and institutional transformation” (p. 53).

Just as teachers need consistent feedback to improve their practice, so also do principals benefit from ongoing feedback and support through coaching (Goldring et al., 2018; Honig, 2012; Thessin, 2018). Much of the research conducted on mentoring or coaching of principals exists for support with brand new principals, (Barnett, 2013; Carver, 2010; Drucker, 2015; Ferrell, 2014; Frels, Zientek, James-Ward, 2013; Schecter, 2014) and research examining coaching with experienced principals is scant (Silver, Chandler, & Lochmiller, 2010).

Aguilar (2013) proposes that the coaching of all principals, with or without experience, will allow them to become “artful masters” in their profession. Further, “these changes can lead to the transformation of [the] education system and the experiences and outcomes of the children it is meant to serve” (p. 16). A plethora of coaching models exist to serve as professional development approaches to support

principals in enacting change within themselves and the organizations in which they lead. The following models encompass most of the approaches to coaching utilized in education:

- Facilitative Coaching “supports clients to learn new ways of thinking and being through reflection, analysis, observation, and experimentation: this awareness influences their behaviors” (Aguilar, 2013, p. 23).
- Instructional Coaching involves reciprocal sharing of personal experience, and the coach sharing expertise with the coachee (i.e., modeling, providing resources and direct instruction (Bloom et al., 2005).
- Directive (or instructive) coaching focuses on changing the behaviors of the clients by the manager (Enescu & Popescu, 2013).
- Consultative Coaching utilizes coach-as-consultant who imparts resources, experience, and expertise that benefit the principal being coached and the school (Bloom, et al., 2005).
- Cognitive Coaching involves “the ability to self-monitor, self-analyze, and self-evaluate” (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993, p. 57).
- Collaborative Coaching involves the incorporation of instruction and facilitation, with the outcome being concrete action, focused on a goal to expand knowledge, skills, and the internal capacity of the principal (Bloom et al., 2005).
- Ontological Coaching focuses on exploring self-perceptions and attitudes as underlying drivers of behavior and communication (Aguilar, 2013).

- Blended coaching involves applying a variety of coaching strategies that include instructional, consultative, collaborative, facilitative, and transformational—while engaging in reflective thinking, in response to reflective questions, and instruction. (Bloom et al., 2005).
- Transformational Coaching “incorporates strategies from directive and facilitative coaching, as well as cognitive and ontological coaching” (Aguilar, 2013, p. 25).
- Evocative Coaching involves “calling forth motivation and movement in people, through conversation and a way of being, so they achieve desired outcomes and enhance their quality of life” (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010, p. 7).

Although a variety of coaching models exist, the general approach of reflecting on practices through feedback sessions with a coach is recognized by the American Management Association (2008) as one of the most significant approaches used in professional development of executives and leaders (Goff et al., 2014). This format is often used by campus principals to enhance their leadership skills (Goldring et al., 2009). Additional studies indicate that this approach to coaching improves personal awareness (Felicello, 2014) and professional practice (Wise & Cavazos, 2017), attributes that can further enhance student achievement and school improvement (Robertson, 2008).

Coaching as Professional Learning

The professional development strategy of coaching requires principals being coached to be reflective about their thoughts, beliefs and actions (Collett, 2015).

Affirming the practice of reflection, Barnett and Mahony (2006) believe that “effective

school improvement will only occur in a culture where reflection prevails for students, teachers, and administrators” (p. 500). The leader of the school is responsible for creating a vision and culture for a campus which is foundational to school improvement.

Barnett and Mahony (2006) find that “effective school improvement will only occur in a culture where reflection prevails for students, teachers, and administrators” (p. 500). An openness to learning and change is critical for principals to model for teachers, parents and students in the communities in which they serve as a campus principal.

Recent research from Aas et al., (2019) purports that principals’ openness to learning new practices often results in transformation, change and enhanced instructional leadership. This study is in support of programs that contribute to increasing the need or sense of urgency for change in schools and practices, increasing the efficacy and confidence of the principals and new leadership practices and approaches that involve reflection and develop their metacognitive capacity (2019). While the professional development practice of coaching does involve developing reflection and metacognition, it will not be efficacious if the client does not willingly participate in the process. Therefore, it has a limited effect when used as a compliance activity in a school improvement plan. Engaging in coaching creates the opportunity for principals to reflect on their thinking and actions, to see themselves and the world in new ways, and reimagine solutions to problems previously not considered. Rhodes and Fletcher (2013) attest that both mentoring and coaching are essential ingredients in building self-confidence in the journey to becoming a successful school leader. When principals reflect on their practice, they gain courage and confidence in their decision-making and

implement new actions or behaviors needed to make progress in their own leadership development and school outcomes (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; James-Ward & Potter, 2011). Robertson (2008) notes that “coaching establishes a framework for the development of collaborative action research processes that lead to personal, professional, and institutional transformation” (p. 53). It is important to note, while coaching does involve in-depth conversations about emotional issues and may involve exploration of a person’s psyche and childhood, conversations should be focused on learning and developing new processing and reflective problem-solving skills within the context of school leadership.

Additionally, Pardini (2003) iterates that coaching benefits organizations and individuals by improving leadership skills and productivity of leaders engaging in coaching as a form of professional development. While providing feedback is an important aspect of coaching, feedback in isolation may not prove to be successful. Principals tend to think more highly of themselves and protect themselves from feedback that is inconsistent with how they see themselves (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Goldsmith, 2004), and often reject the validity of the feedback, refusing to accept responsibility for responding to the feedback. In addition, they often struggle with finding meaning in the feedback and drawing valid conclusions about their practice (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005), thus struggling to design effective plans to change their behavior. Providing feedback can directly inform or influence leaders’ practice. However, adding coaching to the communication of feedback can also help principals to better understand the feedback, and develop an effective plan to influence changes in their expertise (Goff et al., 2014).

Aguilar (2017) suggests districts consider the following before deciding on coaching as a viable option for professional development of principals:

1. Create a vision for the training to include goals and criteria for effective coaching.
2. Coaching must not be connected to supervision in any way.
3. A coach is a facilitator of another adult's learning process and is not a mentor.
4. Coaches need training on how to facilitate adult learning

Leaders experiencing high levels of productivity, have higher levels of job satisfaction and stay within the organization for longer periods of time. Priest and Middleton's (2016) recent work supports coaching as a way to develop self-awareness and a leader identity, which is what undergirds leadership capacity (Felicello, 2014). For example, Wise and Cavazos (2017) found that 85% of principals indicated they have improved their practice as a result of coaching, and 71% assessed that their participation in coaching had an effect on student achievement.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership is contextual and begins with the development of self (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Personal development is a process in which learners actively connect what they know (about themselves and the world around) to new knowledge and construct new meanings (Naylor & Keogh, 1999). Therefore, the focus is on the process of learning, or meaning making, rather than on the product of learning (Ultanir, 2012). It involves a progression along inseparable trajectories of participation, reflection, and openness to change, for "learning, transformation, and change are always implicated in

one another” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57). These trajectories culminate in a change in beliefs and actions, ultimately leading to personal growth of educational leaders; challenging them to interpret the meaning of their habits and behaviors that contribute to the construction of their identity (Mezirow, 2000, 2009; Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019).

The theory of transformational learning embodies this process of “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. 49). It is based on the belief that learning "results in a change in how we see ourselves" (Malik, 2016, p. 49). Within the context of this study, I believe transformational learning will occur if or when principal participants start to think differently, be different and lead in a different way. Throughout transformational opportunities, participants construct knowledge by reflecting on their experiences, beliefs and perspectives to construct new beliefs, which result in new actions (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). Houchens et al. (2017) suggest that the trust between the coach and the coachee builds the foundation for deep self-reflection of the principal. Learning becomes “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). Transformational learning occurs when our beliefs, attitudes, or perspectives change, becoming more open to change itself. Through reflection on declarative and procedural knowledge (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008), new beliefs are developed, that eventually lead to new leadership behaviors or actions (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019; Mezirow, 2000).

Transformational learning theory undergirds the study, using the framework as described in Figure 2, which is adapted from Mezirow (2000) and Isopahkala-Bouret (2008). Knowledge results from the dialogue between the coach and the coachee (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014). When principals actively engage in coaching, they reflect on the organizational and student outcomes that result from thoughts and actions around leadership. As principals delve deeper into their reflections, thinking about the behaviors and beliefs that influence their leadership practices, they often experience a shift in their perspective see situations in a new way. This shift in perspective often results in a shift in beliefs and an openness to change. Consequently, these shifts in beliefs lead to new beliefs, new actions and new outcomes (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014). When a change in beliefs and perspectives leads to new ways of thinking and behaving, transformational learning has occurred (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019).

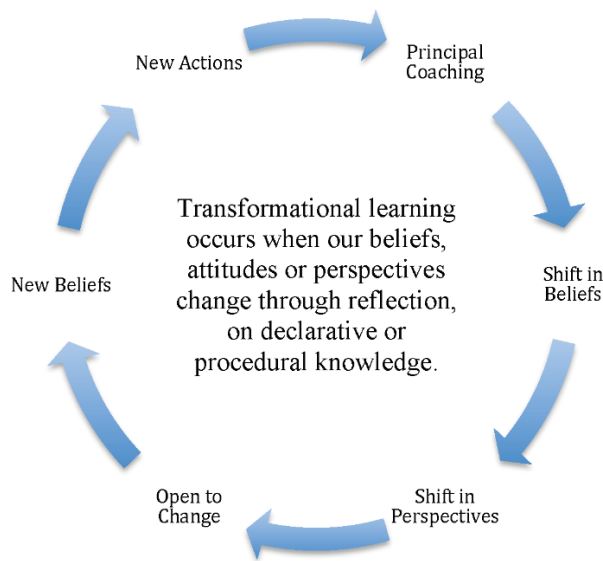


Figure 2. Theoretical framework adapted from Mezirow and Isopahkala-Bouret.

Transformational learning theory differs from other theories of learning in that the individual learner is the focus and the learning that takes place involves changes in

perspective. It is comprised of the following four activities:

1. Perceiving shortcomings in one's perspective.
2. Self-examination—questioning perspectives and their origins.
3. Experimenting with new perspectives.
4. Integrating new perspectives into life and behaviors (Mezirow, 2000)

Utilizing the framework adapted from Mezirow (2000) and Isopahkala-Bouret (2008) I am interested to see if participants receiving coaching experience learning that is transformational. The analysis of the experiences of principals being coached will focus on transformational learning as a process rather than an outcome, as noted in the framework in Figure 2. The theoretical framework utilized in this study was adapted from Mezirow (2000) and Isopahkala-Bouret (2008). The inception of transformation begins with the development of the self as researched by Kouzes and Posner (2011), based on the belief that learning “results in a change in how we see ourselves” (Malik, 2016, p. 49). During coaching sessions, principals reflect on their behaviors and beliefs and how those beliefs influence leadership practices. Experience with coaching invites principals to engage in reflective practices, allowing for principals to see their behaviors through a new lens, often leading to a change in beliefs and ultimately in behaviors (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). Isopahkala-Bouret (2008) confirms the idea that transformational learning occurs when we have a change in our beliefs, attitudes and perspectives, which result in new leadership behaviors (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019; Mezirow, 2000).

Summary

Within school reform, research affirms that leadership skills, knowledge, and attributes of principals impact organizational effectiveness (Hogan, 2007) and student achievement (Marzano, et al., 2005). However, school reform strategies tend to predominantly target building capacity of teachers rather than building the capacity of school leaders (Bryk et al., 2010). Principal coaching has emerged as a professional development strategy that provides individualized support for school leaders, focused on developing personal and professional skills to enhance their leadership performance and positively impact student outcomes (Hargrove, 2008; Reeves & Ellison, 2009; Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Ng (2012) contend that coaching and mentoring have a positive influence on the performance of principals in their job and in their all-around well-being. There is abundant research to suggest that coaching for principals has the ability to transform leaders and schools (e.g., Eastman, 2019; Finn et al., 2007; Grant et al., 2009; James-Ward, 2011; Wise & Jacobo, 2010) by providing a platform in which leaders can reflect on their beliefs and behaviors through regular conversations with coaches (Goldring et al., 2009). This professional development strategy often results in the transformation of the leader and the school (Robertson, 2008).

There is a growing consensus that coaching can be used as a viable strategy to develop individuals and organizations (Grant et al., 2009). However, it is important to note the lack of research over time regarding coaching outcomes make this approach to professional development prone to questions regarding its effectiveness (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009; Bozer & Sarros,

2012). Additionally, research on coaching is typically conducted by practitioners, and not trained researchers, making the validity of the studies subject to skepticism (Grant, 2013).

III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to give voice to principals who have experienced coaching as an approach to their own professional development and how it contributes to their transformational learning. This chapter provides a description of methods and qualitative design, that guided this research study. The broader purpose of the study was to examine the "universal" or "essence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 10) of the phenomenon of coaching in educational leadership as experienced by principal leaders themselves. The rationale for selecting principals for the study was explained along with procedures for data collection, analysis and trustworthiness of the study. Limitations and ethical considerations of the method used were discussed at the conclusion of the chapter.

Research Epistemology

The epistemological and philosophical framework for this study was rooted in constructivism. As an epistemological paradigm, constructivism suggests that "a mindset or system of ideas . . . does not exist independently of us: it exists only as it appears to each of us as the result of the process of construction" (Homstrup, 2014, p. 9) and creation of knowledge, meaning-making and learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). I agree with this perspective, specifically that new knowledge is constructed by utilizing previous experience, background knowledge and new information to construct new meaning (Ultanir, 2012). Connecting old with new experiences allows us to construct new meaning about the world, and thus create new knowledge.

According to Crotty (1998) using a constructionist epistemology to reflect on and understand knowledge allows people who have the same experience to understand their

experience and construct meaning in different ways (p. 9). Similar to Descartes and Husserl, I see much value in reflecting on my experiences and knowledge. It is in this reflection that I am able to “return to the self to discover the nature of meaning of things as they appear and in their essence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). I believe that through the reflective process, found in the practice of coaching and in transcendental phenomenological research methodology, what I know becomes clearer, though never fully realized. It is important to note that my “coherent meaning-making” (Fosnot, 2005, p. 33) or understanding of coaching as a phenomenon will never be static, as it will change and continue to develop with new experiences and data collected. The ways in which I view the world are important in selecting the method I chose to research the transformational learning of principals (Crotty, 1998). Thus, viewed through a constructivist lens, the aim of this study was not to establish objective/fully realized truth, but to construct a deep understanding of the phenomenon of coaching, as experienced by the participants.

Research Methodology

Creswell (2009) identifies three general methods of research to consider when choosing a method of study: (a) quantitative, (b) qualitative, and (c) mixed method research. Qualitative researchers seek to understand the richness of people’s experience, as they perceive it (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A qualitative research design was the most appropriate approach to answer the following research questions posed for this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of principals engaging in coaching for their own professional development?
2. How does the coaching experience contribute to transformational learning?

A qualitative research method explored how principals experience coaching, focused on words or narratives rather than numbers, to uncover the quality of the experience of coaching, as opposed to the quantity of the experience of coaching. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research provides a view of the world, as seen by the researcher, through interpretation of data collected. This method of research does not aim to generalize regarding the information, but to uncover specific details about the experience studied (Creswell, 2013). The intent of this study was to make the phenomenon of coaching visible, as experienced by principals. My interest in the social world drew me to study the qualitative aspects of the phenomena of coaching rather than the quantitative aspects studied in the natural world (Crotty, 1998). As van Kaam (1969) observes:

Irrelevant empirical research is produced by the totally detached, abstract, and isolated investigation carried on by the neutral spectator of behavior who is indifferent to the relationship between his abstract game and the life situation Relevant research is that which explores, describes, and empirically tests human behavior while preserving a “lived” relationship with it in the reality of life. (pp. 26-27)

I did not aim to use this study to collect facts, but rather to obtain knowledge and meaning through subjectivity and offer insight into the essence of coaching as a professional development approach for principals (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, a qualitative method was more appropriate than a quantitative method for this study.

Phenomenology. This study explored the experiences of principals with coaching, utilized as a form for their own professional development and considered how

it contributes to their own transformational learning. A phenomenological approach was used because this study aimed to discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences, or knowledge of coaching as it appeared to consciousness (Hays & Singh, 2012). Phenomenology places value on how we experience the world to include the experiences themselves (van Manen, 2016), and allows the researcher to "engage with phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately" (Creswell, 2013, p. 79), distilling the "essential structure" (Fraenkel et al., 2015, p. 431) of the participants' experience with a particular phenomenon.

Using phenomenology as a research method required that I look at coaching of principals in a different way than what is already known to me, with critical reflection, minimizing "presuppositions and constructions" (Crotty, 1998, p. 83) of that which is known about the phenomena of coaching. I believe this method was most suitable for this study because my experiences being coached and coaching others need to be set aside, in order for me to study how the principals in the study experienced coaching in a way that is open, without judgement and unfettered (Moustakas, 1994).

According to Van Manen (2016):

Phenomenology does not study the "what of our experience but the "experience" of the what-the experience of the intentional object, thing, entity, event as it appears in consciousness. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, and the phenomena are someone's experiences-belonging to someone's stream of consciousness. For Husserlian phenomenological inquiry, experience is the thing and "how" the things of experience appear to consciousness is the focus. (p. 91)

I described the essence of what all participants had in common as they described

their human experience of coaching through textural descriptions of the experience, gathered through interviews, participant reflective journal entries, researcher's journal entries and field notes analyzed without any pre-judgements or interpretations from the researcher.

Transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology served as the specific phenomenological approach for this study. I chose transcendental phenomenology over hermeneutical phenomenology for this research study to give voice to the experiences of principals who utilized coaching as an approach to their own professional development. Although I have been a principal who has experienced coaching, I wanted to illuminate how other principals experienced it.

I acquired knowledge of the phenomenon through using multiple methods of data collection and provided thick, rich descriptions of the experiences of the principals in my analysis. This qualitative research design allowed me to describe experiences that were common between the participants and uncover the true essence of the phenomenon of coaching (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). According to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology is “a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (p. 49), and not how we interpret them to be.

Participant Selection

The participants in this study included eight principals of public schools in Central Texas. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research because such samples can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 156). Since the intent of this study

was to understand how the particular principals experienced coaching, as opposed to developing a collective story about how most or all principals, the decision to study five to eight principals was consistent with Dukes (1984) recommendation of three to ten participants for a phenomenological study. Compatible with Hayes and Singh (2012), the aim to gain in depth understanding of the experiences of these five to eight participants would substantiate the number of participants for this study. Fewer participants are needed for a phenomenological study than for typical empirical statistical approaches to research (Dukes, 1984).

I also utilized my professional network and applied snowball sampling to identify a sufficient number of participants to consider for this study (Hays & Singh, 2012). This method allowed me to identify and have access to the potential participants quickly, to find out if they met the criteria identified for this study and select them as a participant for the study. Identifying the criteria of the sample is necessary as increased diversity of participants impacts the level of difficulty in identifying themes in the data to distill the overall essence of the experience studied (Creswell, 2013). The following criteria were applied to participants selected for this study:

- a. Participants were principals in Texas.
- b. Participants had experienced the phenomenon of coaching for at least one full year.
- c. Participants had been coached by someone that was internal or external to their school or district.
- d. Participants were engaged in coaching conversations at least once a month.

- e. Participants were located within Bexar County, San Patricio County, and Bastrop County.

To recruit participants meeting the above criteria for this research, I employed the following process:

- a. Identified principals who were being coached by reaching out to colleagues within my professional network in Education Service Center Region 3 and 20.
- b. Contacted potential participants by phone or email, providing them with a brief overview of the study, the criteria needed for participation, and determining whether or not they met the set criteria to participate in the study. (see Appendix for phone call and email protocol).
- c. Provided more detailed information about the purpose and scope of the study and secured written consent for participation (See Appendix for phone and email protocols and participation form). In the event they did not qualify for the study, I thanked them for their time.
- d. I asked participants meeting the criteria and willing to participate in the study to provide names and contact information of other principals they knew who met the criteria and may be interested in participating in the study.
- e. Determined dates, times and locations to hold interviews.

Data Collection Procedures

Two in-depth interviews with participants, participant reflective journal entries, and a researcher's journal and field notes were sources of data for this study. Once participants were identified for this study, two in-depth, semi-structured interviews were scheduled for each participant, focusing on how participants experienced coaching as an

approach to their own professional development. Seidman (2006) stated that this particular method of data collection in phenomenological research, “give[s] enormous power to the stories for a relatively few participants” (p. 55). Reliable semi-structured interviews, according to Creswell (2003), “should use a small number of open-ended questions that are designed to draw out the co-researchers views and opinions” (p. 188). Participants were asked to submit written journal reflections within one week of each of the two interviews to capture additional reflections about their experience with coaching.

Interviews. In-depth, phenomenological interviewing illuminates the voices of participants, empowering them to share experiences of their own professional learning (Seidman, 2006). Two in-depth and interactive audio-recorded interviews were conducted with six of the eight participants, lasting no more than one-and-a-half hours each, utilizing open-ended comments and questions (Moustakas, 1994). The two participants who were only interviewed once did not respond to email attempts to schedule the second interview. This conversational and open dialogue centered around how participants experienced coaching as an approach to their own professional development. It was important to have the participants focus on the experiences that had “particular awareness and impact [on them], and then describe the experience fully” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). The interview protocol was used as a guide, knowing that not all questions needed to be asked, depending on the conversation about the experience studied (see Appendix B for interview questions). The hour-and-a-half timeframe was an estimation, since interviews tended to be governed by experiential time rather than by a clock (Moustakas, 1990).

The first interview lasted a little longer than the second interview and was centered around how principals experienced coaching. It was important to establish a rapport with the participants and make them more comfortable with the interview process. Initially, I asked about how they have experienced the principalship and to talk specifically about their current experience. Questions began to narrow on coaching, as I wanted to learn about how they came to have a coach and what typical coaching sessions were like. The organization of coaching sessions delved into whether or not they used an agenda or another organizational tool to plan for the coaching sessions. In order to gather the essence of their experience, as is the goal of phenomenological research, subsequent questions focused on participant feelings around the phenomenon of coaching.

The second interviews took place several weeks after the first interview. I wanted to be sure to engage in the process of reduction after each round of interviews, to see if there were any themes that emerged during both interviews. Transformational learning was the central theme in the second interview, and whether or not their own beliefs and actions were transformed as a result of their experience with coaching. I was interested to learn about their perception of the effectiveness of coaching, as described by the participants. The interview sought to discover if personal and or professional changes in their beliefs and behaviors were noted. Participants were asked what they liked or appreciated about coaching also about their thoughts on how coaching sessions might be adjusted to make the coaching experience more meaningful and purposeful. Participants were also asked about their understanding of transformational learning and who else they thought could benefit from coaching.

Creswell (2003) recommends using a few questions that will extract views,

opinions, and beliefs of the principals in the study. The following are suggested strategies to abide by for a “good” interview (Hays & Singh, 2012) that were adopted for this study:

- a. Make the interviewee as comfortable as possible by communicating that there is no right answer, as the aim of the study is to understand how they experience the phenomenon.
- b. Utilize simulation questions when appropriate to capitalize on their expertise on the subject.
- c. Make assumptions or presuppositions, only when appropriate.
- d. Use illustrative questions to assist participant to answer the questions posed.
- e. Do not ask questions that limit responses.
- f. Do not attempt to convince the participant to think as you do about the phenomenon.
- g. Avoid asking “why” questions, as they tend to make the participant defensive.
- h. Prepare and use a one-shot question, when appropriate.
- i. Always give interviewees the last word, to capitalize on the power of their voice and finish the interview strong.
- j. Review the recording or read the transcript to ensure the participants words are significantly more than that of the researcher.

In order to prevent field issues, new batteries were inserted into the hand-held recorder for each interview, and a back-up recording of the interviews was collected using my cell phone audio-recording feature (Creswell, 2013).

Participant reflective journal entries. In addition to the interviews, participants

were asked to submit written reflections within one week of each of the interviews to capture additional reflections about their experience with coaching as a strategy to develop their leadership and learning (see Appendix C for reflective journal entry prompts). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) have found journal writing to be critical to phenomenological studies, recommending writing as “a valid method of knowing” (p. 349). The day following each interview reflective questions were sent to the principals via email to capture any new insights or possible revelations after each interview.

Reflective questions were developed based on research from Fusarelli & Militello, (2012) and James-Ward & Potter, (2011) who posit that principals gain confidence and implement new actions when they reflect on their practice, hence the question about feelings about their experience in coaching (Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013). Aguilar (2013) recommends principals reflecting and processing their experiences through journal writing. Reflection on beliefs and leadership practices allows principals to uncover new beliefs and behaviors which may often lead to transformational learning of principals (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000).

The first set of reflective questions were:

1. In reflecting on your interview regarding your experience with coaching, what feelings emerged?
2. Why do you think these feelings surfaced?

The second set of reflective questions were:

1. In reflecting on your experiences with coaching; how, if at all, has coaching transformed your learning and practice as a leader?
2. Share any professional and/or personal examples of this.

3. Do you have any final thoughts about coaching as an approach to your professional development?

The purpose of utilizing these reflective journal entries was to ascertain additional reflections from the participants about their experiences after the interviews were completed. I found that reminder emails to principals were needed as only three of the eight principals returned the reflections within the one-week timeframe established in the study. Most of the journal entries were brief, typing one to three paragraphs to share their reflections on the questions. However, in most cases, participants made connections in their thinking and practice as a result of the reflective journal entry.

Researcher's journal and field notes. I utilized a journal and field notes to document observations during interviews that could not be captured by the audio recorder. Thick descriptions (Creswell, 2013) of what was observed or heard were captured as initial "jottings" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) to be referenced before, during and after the interviews and during data analysis. Contemporaneous notes were taken while in the research setting (Angrosino, 2007) as details of every aspect of participant interviews were vital for a thorough understanding of the experiences described and discussed by each of the participants. Connections between the participants' experiences were also captured and noted in the researcher's journal.

Data Management and Analysis

Moustakas confirms that the "reflective-interpretive process includes not only a description of the experience as it appears in consciousness but also an analysis and astute interpretation of the underlying conditions, historically and aesthetically, that account for the experience" (1994, p. 10). In conducting transcendental

phenomenological research, it was essential to begin with the process of epoche (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). This phenomenological method required me to exclude myself and my own experiences from the interpretation of the data to ensure “all experiences will be perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). In order to do this, the researcher must set aside, or bracket their own experience to gain a new perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

This concept of epoche (bracketing) is the first step in conducting transcendental phenomenological research and was developed by Husserl (1994) to “significantly reduce the influence of preconceived thoughts, judgments, and biases” (p. 90). In epoche, I attempted to dismiss biases that might have prevented me from effectively listening to the participants in the study to diminish the possibility of compromising the interpretation of the data.

Epoche: Sample

The second person that I recalled was another coach from my years as a principal. This individual would meet with me once the school year got started and our student achievement data was not where they (the institution) wanted it to be. At our meetings, they would ask why my data looked the way it did and what I planned to do about it. I actually got very sick to my stomach before and after these visits. One time, my heart was racing so fast, I had to gather my emotions, so I walked out to my car, turned it on and raised the AC and started breathing deeply. I had to seek help from my physician about how I was responding to this style of leadership and oversight. Once I started down this path of memories, my heart started to race, all over again.

The next step in conducting a transcendental phenomenological research study was for me to engage in phenomenological reduction (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000), which required that I read interview transcripts, journal reflection entries, and field notes multiple times to understand the phenomenon from the point of view of the participants. Reduction was utilized to ensure that I saw these descriptive experiences as external, and to ensure that each “angle of perception” was documented in detail so that the “qualities of the experience” became the focus rather than the interpretations of the meaning of experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90).

Reduction: Themes Identified after First Interview

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build relationship • Trust • Asks questions to have prin think • Asks - does not tell • Gets prin to think about practice • Goal setting and outcome-based • Better outcome -coach is selected, not assigned • External coach better • Listens with intent • Makes principal feel good • Makes principal feel special • Makes principal feel knowledgeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach should not evaluate princ • Prin must be willing to be open v • Coaching brings clarity • Coaching is a process • Helps develop thinking habits • Coach handles process to free up principal to be able to reflect/think • Coaching is an investment of time • Must be right fit • Must be intentional - build principal capacity • No hidden agendas/motives • Open to feedback • Relationship cultivated over time
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Reduction: Themes Identified after Both Interviews

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering-choice in selecting own coach • Open to learning • Open to change • Relationship between principal and coach must be authentic • Must have high level of trust with coach • Relationship must be authentic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing mental habits • Coaching is practice, not compliance activity • Coaching helps gain confidence in thinking • Transform thinking to transform practices and way of life
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Horizontalization was an important part of phenomenological reduction in which new perspectives about the phenomenon of the study were uncovered. In horizontalization, I began to identify key statements in the transcripts, used in the analysis of data. During this process, each key statement was considered equal to the others and thus clusters of meaning were developed and grouped into themes. Individual textural descriptions for individual participants were combined into composite textural descriptions for the group, which were then developed into tensions.

Horizontalization: Tensions in Coaching

Assigned	→ ←	Self-selected
Internal	→ ←	External
Not establishing rapport	→ ←	Trusting relationship
Ask questions	→ ←	Answering questions
Outcome based	→ ←	Process based
Open ended	→ ←	Goal focused

Agenda driven by coach	→ ←	Agenda driven by principal
Fixed mindset	→ ←	Growth mindset

The fourth important step of transcendental phenomenological research was imaginative variation (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000) in which I considered new ways to view the phenomenon. “Imaginative Variation enabled the researcher to derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through Phenomenological Reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).

Imaginative Variation: Themes Narrowed from Tensions

<p>Conditions necessary for coaching.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assigned versus selecting relational partners • artificial versus authentic interactions
<p>Framing and reframing sessions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • open and structured conversation versus unstructured conversation with preconceived outcomes • problem-centered versus person-centered focus
<p>Transforming learning and practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting the right answers versus reflecting on the right question • developing strategic practices versus creating thinking habits • competence versus confidence

Imaginative Variation

1. Coaching relationships built on trust create conditions for authentic interactions and transformational learning.
2. Establishing a clear intent before the coaching session inspires purposeful conversations and opportunities for growth in specific areas or with specific outcomes.
3. Principal coaching breeds sustainable leadership by creating habits of mind that transform principals' aspirations toward efficacy and esteem.

Assertions

The final step in the transcendental phenomenological research process was the synthesis of meanings and essences (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 1970). Textural and structural descriptions were synthesized into one statement, which was the essence of the phenomenon. Husserl (1970) warned that this step of transcendental phenomenological research may not be perfect, because our perceptions may not always be representative of the phenomenon in its entirety.

Synthesis of Meanings and Essences: Final Themes

Establishing a Relationship Conducive to Transformational Learning

- Trust
- Authentic Interactions
- Person-centered focus

Transformational Coaching Practices

- Coaching sessions focused on reflective practices.

- Coaching sessions focused on questions.
- Accountability-based coaching sessions.

Creating Transformational Campus Culture

- Reflection
- Productive and meaningful communication
- Accountability

Trustworthiness

Understanding that data analysis is an iterative and recursive process is critical to conducting “valid, rigorous, and ethical” research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 225). A rich, thick description of participants’ experiences was gathered throughout the data collection process and formulated in the analysis process to detail experiences and ensure trustworthiness. Reading and rereading all data sources were done throughout this process, allowing connections in the data and patterns to be identified. Member checks were performed by letting the participants read transcribed interview segments. Any discrepancies were noted, and appropriate changes were made to the text.

Data analysis were verified by sharing the analysis with trusted colleagues from my writing group to seek alternative perspectives using the following questions:

- Does the author convey an understanding of the philosophical tenets of phenomenology?
- Does the author have a clear “phenomenon” to study that is articulated concisely?

- Does the author use procedures of data analysis in phenomenology, such as the procedures recommended by Moustakas (1994) or van Manen (1990)?
- Does the author convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants?
- Does this essence include a description of the experience and the context in which it occurred?
- Is the author reflective throughout the study? (Creswell, 2013, p. 260)

Additionally, Crotty (1998) believes the practice of seeking alternative perspectives from other colleagues and scholars challenges the researcher's analysis of the data, uncovering the essential truths. Exposing feelings and experiences of the reflective participants served to illuminate the phenomenon of coaching as experienced by principals.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The limitations of this study refer to areas that the researcher does not have control over (Roberts, 2010). The specific limitations of this study were as follows:

1. The sample size utilized in this study represents how individuals experienced coaching and cannot be generalized to represent how a population experiences coaching.
2. There are variances in how and why the principals began to utilize a coach. Some may have been assigned by the central office, serving as internal coaches. Others may have been hired independently by the principal.
3. Using this qualitative method to study the phenomenon of coaching can be messy, and "it is not a method in the sense of a clear recipe of how to do flawless research" (Dukes, 1984, p. 202).

4. This study is focused on how principals experience coaching in general, and not on the myriad of coaching models used, which could also account for differences in results.
5. The coaches of the principals in this study did not necessarily use the same model of coaching, which may have added a level of differentiation in the findings.
6. The analysis focused on transcripts of interviews, participant reflective journals and the researcher's journal.
7. The principals interviewed were only from one state, Texas, and analysis cannot be generalized to other states or geographical areas.

Ethical considerations are vital to a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). Formal ethical approval was obtained through the Institutional Review Board at Texas State University before conducting the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect each individual participating in the study. The participants were informed of the research process and how the data were to be stored after the completion of the study. The principals were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time, before obtaining their signed consent to participate in the study. It was explicitly explained to each individual that, upon request, the researcher would remove them from the study. The data collected were handled in the following manner to ensure each participant's utmost privacy. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a transcription service, then coded and stored electronically using a password protected file. Data remains stored on a password-protected computer and in locked storage when not in use. Only I had access to the raw data.

Summary

Coaching is emerging as a professional development approach and gaining attention and respect (Grissom & Harrington, 2010) for teachers, principals, superintendents, and CEOs (Cooper & Conley, 2011; Reiss, 2015), equipping them with additional skills to successfully traverse the challenges each faces within the scope of their work. By interviewing principals to learn about their experience with coaching as a job-embedded approach to professional learning (Goldring et al., 2018; Honig, 2012; Thessin, 2018), this study garnered first-hand information on how they experienced coaching, and how it contributed to their transformational learning.

This chapter presented the purpose of the study and rationale for the research methodology and methods selected. The research design was discussed, along with the participant and site selection process. The data collection strategy was discussed, and processes for analysis of data were reviewed. The chapter concluded with limitations of using transcendental phenomenology as a research method for this study followed by a review of ethical considerations.

IV. FINDINGS

This study examined the lived experiences of principals in Central Texas who utilized coaching as a strategy for professional development and how these experiences contributed to their transformational learning. The study sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge surrounding principal coaching as a form of professional development in two ways. First, it examined coaching as a tool for job-embedded, differentiated professional development opportunities for principals. Second, it highlighted the possibilities of coaching as a vehicle for transformational learning in school administrators. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of principals engaging in coaching for their own professional development?
2. How does the coaching experience contribute to their own transformational learning?

Of the eight principals who participated in the study, six participated in two separate face-to-face interviews. The remaining two principals were each interviewed once. Additional data were captured through reflections on follow-up interview questions participants received via email, as well as the researcher's reflection journal and field notes. Moustakas's (1994) reflective-interpretive process was used to analyze and interpret the data for this study. This process included not only a description of the experience as it appeared in consciousness but also an analysis and astute interpretation of the "underlying conditions, historically and aesthetically, that accounted for the experience" (p. 10) using the following steps of data analysis:

- Epoche (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000) requires the researcher to bracket their experiences with the phenomenon of coaching.
- Phenomenological reduction (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000), which requires the researcher to read interview transcripts multiple times to understand the phenomenon from the point of view of the participants.
- Imaginative variation (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000) in which the researcher considers new ways to view the phenomenon.
- Synthesis of meanings and essences (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000).

This chapter is organized by brief profiles of each research participant, followed by thematic descriptions of the relevant findings that were identified from data analysis. The themes identify important characteristics of coaching that impact its effectiveness as a professional development tool, as well as concrete tensions that exist within each characteristic that influence its role in the transformational learning process. These tensions will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

Participant Profiles

The participants in this study consisted of eight school principals who met the following criteria: a) participants were current principals, b) participants had experienced the phenomenon of coaching for at least one year, c) participants received coaching from an internal or external coach d) participants were within Bexar County, San Patricio County and Bastrop County in Central Texas. For purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms for all participants were used in reporting the findings.

Cole

Cole is a 43-year-old White male and works as a principal of a campus in Central Texas. All his experience as a campus principal has been at this same campus. He has been a professional educator for seventeen years, serving three years as a teacher, six years as an assistant principal, and eight years as a principal, all in the same Texas school district. Cole comes from a family of educators and feels like it is his duty to “continue the legacy of working as an administrator in public schools,” just like his father.

Cole reported that his coaching sessions would last for either half a day or the whole day, depending on what he or his coach felt he needed. Sessions were scheduled for one time per month with a coach that he already knew. His coach was a former principal in the district, consequently, he had a high level of trust in her, which seemed to be important to Cole. Having “street cred” was something that Cole appreciated about his coach.

Reese

Reese is a 47-year-old Black woman who came into education after a previous career in business. She has been in education for 18 years, the last nine as a principal. Having been tagged as a model teacher and leader by her superintendent when he asked her to participate in his research study, she felt his support and belief in her as a classroom teacher pushed her to become more interested in the role of campus leadership at her district.

Reese did not select her own coach but was awarded a coach through her work with The Principal’s Center, a professional development program sponsored by The Harvard Graduate School of Education. This opportunity gave her access to research-

based professional development programs specifically designed to support educational leaders who serve as school principals. Although the purpose of the grant was to provide coaching to prolong development of leadership skills that might positively impact student outcomes, she did not seem to be invested in coaching as a long-term practice. She made use of the opportunity to have a coach, but she also viewed having the coach as compliance activity for the program she was participating in, as opposed to participating in coaching as a professional development opportunity. Although the funding for the grant ran out, she still sees the need to invest in a coach to continue her own professional development. She is very determined and describes her leadership style as data driven.

Reese noted that her monthly coaching sessions would last all day long. She described her coach as a “systems thinker” who led based on research. She said that he would help her to think of how to create systems and capture them in writing so that, from year to year, she could make small changes as needed to improve the organization. Reese always came to coaching conversations with specific topics or issues she was struggling with as a principal, and her coach would ask intentional, probing questions to get her to take a deeper dive into the real issue at hand. When there was a break in the conversation, her coach would say “let’s walk some classrooms” and they would visit 15 classrooms or so and go back to the office to discuss what they saw. She divulged that he would hold her accountable and would always follow up on what was agreed upon at the last coaching session.

Jack

Jack is a 50-year-old White male who has spent all his administrative experience in the same urban school district. He had spent five years as an assistant principal and

sixteen years as a principal. Leading by building relationships with people he works with and the community he works for, Jack has been successful putting structures in place to develop a systems approach to meeting specific goals and always finds ways to celebrate successes, large and small. Currently, he is one of two principals in his district hired to go into struggling schools to implement procedures and processes to improve the school climate, teacher efficacy and student achievement. He selected his coach ten years ago and sees being coached as essential in order for him to do his job. His coach is external to the organization and all coaching sessions are scheduled, planned and generally last 45 minutes to one hour. Jack typically has two sessions a month, and he rarely cancels his sessions. His monthly work calendar is scheduled around his coaching sessions, as he sees them as crucial to having a fulfilling life as a husband, father, brother and principal. He uses professional development funds from his budget to fund this necessary leadership development. Consequently, he is also a coach himself, which gives him a unique perspective for this study.

Maria

Maria is a 49-year-old Latina who has spent all fifteen years of her educational career in one district. She taught at an elementary school for seven years, worked as an assistant principal for two years, spent an additional two years as a principal, and the last two years as an administrator at the district's central office. She is currently moved back into the role of principal, taking over a campus that had its previous principal reassigned. Maria has been assigned multiple coaches throughout her administrative career and has had a variety of coaching experiences. All her coaches have been employed by the same district she works for.

Her coaching conversations generally took place once each week, but depending on the coach, were very different experiences that Maria believes resulted in specific outcomes. She recalls her experience as a principal as “lacking confidence” in her own leadership, and thus impacting the success of her campus. One of her coaches had experience as a campus principal, and actually was the principal she worked under as assistant principal in that district. In that role, she supported her principal and carried out the assignments she was given. This coach did not have any formal coaching instruction, and thus did what she knew worked for her as a successful principal. Maria felt she could not get past the roles they had when they had worked together as an administrative team, thus falling back into pattern of the principal telling her what she needed to do, how and when. Maria feels this experience with coaching negatively impacted her confidence level and thus her success as a principal, and ultimately the success of her campus. When asked to describe or tell what she believes a coach is, she shared more of what a coach was not, than she did about what a coach is or should be.

Her second experience with coaching as a principal was with an administrator who had never had experience as a principal but did have formal training as a coach. These conversations much of the time left her feeling “six feet tall and bullet-proof,” and empowered to take on the challenges of the day and strive for improvement in herself and her leadership. When asked to discuss what coaching was with this particular coach, she surmised that “coaching is accountability and holding one another accountable . . . there’s a difference between accountability and just being told to do something.” Maria describes her leadership style as supportive, with accountability; she does all she can to support teachers with their individual needs and to build their confidence, while also

holding them accountable for student outcomes. She mentions confidence throughout the answers to the interview questions and when talking about her leadership.

Minerva

Minerva is a 40-year-old Latina who has spent eighteen years in education, eight years as a teacher and ten years as an administrator. She worked as an assistant principal for one year, before serving as a director for a charter school for four years. Within the last five years she has been a campus principal in one district, two years at one school and three years in another. The leadership coaching experiences and outcomes at each of these schools have been very different. She has had several different coaches assigned by the district's administration, that are actually a part of the central office staff. As a leader, Minerva talks about being global in her thinking and seeing the big picture of what needs to be done. She is a relationship builder and holds individual people accountable for their part in meeting the mission and vision of the organization.

The first coach she had was a former principal, without any formal coaching instruction or experience. The second coach she had did not have any formal principal experience but had expertise and experience as a high-level district leader and more importantly, had a wealth of experiences with coaching. In fact, she has written coaching curriculum that is now used by the state of Texas as a tool for growing principals and other campus/district leaders. Maria and Minerva work in the same district and shared one of the coaches that had been assigned to them from central office.

Wyatt

Wyatt worked as a classroom teacher and physical education coach for twenty-six years before he realized he wanted to go into school leadership. He had a conversation

with his superintendent which encouraged him to go back to school to earn a Master's degree and principalship certification. Wyatt's supervising principal left mid-year during his first year as an assistant principal, and he was promoted with only a few months of administrative experience. He believes he is always "growing and learning" in his role as a principal. He also believes that the principalship allows him to expand his circle of influence as an educator/leader.

His district hired two coaches from the educational regional service center to help two new principals who were having a bit of a hard time. The district arranged for every principal to have a coach, aiming to target a couple of the younger principals. Wyatt recalled "I probably benefited . . . more than maybe their intended targets." He attributes his learning to his desire to learn and grow as a principal and a person. They hired two people from the Region Service Center. Wyatt seemed pleased that his coach selected him. Coaching sessions that were face-to-face were supposed to be on a monthly basis, but only occurred only 4 times in a year. However, he was available for phone calls and would answer email questions as well.

Javier

Javier has worked in education for twenty-one years as a teacher, an assistant principal, a principal and a director. He acquired his coach because the previous superintendent decided to provide coaches to all the campus principals to provide individual support to principals. There were two former superintendents that worked for the Region Service Center that could support principals through coaching. These former superintendents were now employees of the Region Service Center and received formal training in coaching in order to support districts and campuses in this way. Coaching

sessions for Javier were held once every five weeks and lasted for three or four hours and consisted of talking about the campus, the principal, and all staff members.

Conversations would extend to student outcomes. Javier recalled that he received coaching from both of the individuals assigned to serve as coaches for all principals of the district. He believes a coach should “coach, motivate, inspire through rapport, relationships that you continue to try, even when the going gets tough.”

Currently serving as a campus principal, Javier left his director position to go back to leading a campus. When recalling how he became a campus principal, Javier shared “everything in my educational career, no lie, has just happened.” When asked about his leadership style, he paused for a few moments to think about the answer, then he explained “everybody does whatever is needed, then we all have it easier” to describe his leadership philosophy. He reported being a “people person” and enjoys leading teams of teachers. His energy shifted when asked about his philosophy of leadership, making him smile with joy when he said, “I’m blessed to have a team here that is a team versus the splintered groups.” Javier reported that he led his campus by providing unending support to teachers, after identifying their needs. When asked about his experience as a principal, he proudly detailed, “I always felt I did a good job. I was accused of having the highest performing campus with the best attendance and the happiest staff.”

Bensavio

Bensavio has taught and led in the same district throughout his entire 28-year career in education. He was a teacher at both the high school and middle school levels before becoming an elementary school assistant principal. Bensavio is currently the principal of a non-traditional campus that caters to students with disciplinary issues. His

other administrative experience in his 21 years in administration includes leading operational teams at the district level, but he prefers working with kids and teachers than he does working with district-level operational teams. Bensavio was assigned a coach through the Educational Regional Service Center. His coaching sessions were initially scheduled to be held monthly, but only really occurred five times over a ten-month span. His coach was a former school superintendent and former principal and had received formal training in coaching. His coaching sessions integrated coaching and mentoring to develop an adequate support system for principals. Although he no longer has a coach, Bensavio feels his experience with his coach was a “pretty good process” because he helped him to tweak some goals that would lead to better student outcomes. He sees the principalship as an ever-changing job, as there are many demands placed on principals.

Findings

As previously mentioned, Moustakas’s reflective-interpretive process was used to analyze and interpret the data for this study. This process included not only developing a description of the experience of being coached as revealed in principals’ conscious responses but also an analysis and astute interpretation of the underlying conditions that accounted for their coaching experiences. Along with identifying the essence of transformational learning within the coaching experience, several additional themes specific to coaching as an effective professional development tool emerged from analysis of the data. These themes identified the essence of coaching that impacted its effectiveness as a professional development tool, as well as concrete tensions that exist within each characteristic that influenced its role in the transformational learning process. These tensions are addressed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

Identifying Transformational Learning in the Experience with Coaching

The essence of coaching, as experienced by the participants in this study were layered and complex. There was a plethora of experiences that ranged from coaching as a checklist and compliance activity to coaching as a reflective and iterative transformational practice. The defining characteristic for those who experienced transformational learning through their coaching experiences was the ability to reflect over and articulate positive feelings related to the experience. In short, participants who had a more transformational experience with coaching were able to more clearly articulate how they felt after engaging in a coaching session. Empowered is the feeling Cole described after his coaching sessions: “I felt like there’s a light in the darkness. I felt like I am going to get through this. I’m going to make things better. I am going to continue to move forward.” Similarly, Wyatt felt that coaching helped him build confidence in himself, providing motivation to work harder to become a more effective leader. Jack said that he felt both psyched and exhausted after a coaching session, expressing that, “I got past my barrier. And I’m ready to grow. I’m ready to go to the next one. Because usually, when I have a barrier, it just drains my energy because I can’t get past it.” Reece reflected on her experience with coaching and shared, “I definitely have more of a growth mindset. I also reflect on myself more.” In her written reflection, Minerva shared that the coaching relationship emerged for her as an important aspect to her success with coaching, stating:

You have to be coachable. The principal/leader must be vulnerable and open to

feedback. This does not happen in one session, but is a relationship cultivated over time. I think coaching fails to be effective when the principal feels they do not need it or aren't in a truly reflective space. It also fails when the coach has a sense of superiority or wants to catch the leader failing so as to correct them to support the hierarchy of the relationship. Both actors have to come to the relationship equally in order to be beneficial for all.

However, coaching did not evoke the same feeling for all participants. Maria had different experiences with several different coaches. When reflecting on her first coach, the feelings that surfaced were those of defeat or deflation, which led to additional feelings of anxiety and dread for future coaching sessions. Conversely, her next two coaches made her feel empowered, excited, and motivated. Her feelings of anxiety were replaced with anticipation, and she began to look forward to the next coaching session.

Although Bensavio viewed the development of his relationship with his coach meaningful and relevant growth and development (Honig & Ikemoto, 2008), he experienced a disconnect between coaching sessions and his beliefs and practices after his coach left. Bensavio reported that coaching was a good process and would certainly recommend it for other principals, he also said that once the coach left, he felt like he was on an island all over again. He reported that the coaching experience was good, when the coach was there. However, the learning he understood during the coaching conversations did not transfer to his leadership actions beyond the coaching sessions. Bensavio shared that he struggled to take what he learned in his coaching sessions and apply it to his work, even though he understood that to be the purpose of coaching. His hesitancy seemed to hinge on the sharing of personal experiences and his reluctance to do so. He stated that:

What I'm learning is new and important or difficult information. Of course, I'm kind of trying to be sure about that. But when they're wanting me to go and share based on personal experiences sometimes I'm going to be a little bit more reserved.

When asked about his openness to learning new things, he stated "I'm being open to you. I mean, I've never met you before. I don't really have anything to gain or lose from this." Bensavio's willingness to be open and share with a stranger information he considered to be of a personal nature underscores the connection between reflective capacity and transformational learning. His inability to reflect on personal issues during the coaching session impeded his ability to use the information from the coaching sessions to transform his practice. Those participants who were more willing to reflect in these capacities were the ones who made stronger connections between transformational learning and coaching.

Establishing a Relationship Conducive to Transformational Learning

The participants who were able to reflect on their coaching experiences and describe them as transformational learning opportunities identified several key themes related to this connection. The first of these was a reference to trusting and authentic relationships, along with specific and direct coaching practices, as being critical to their transformational experiences. Although each of these components will be discussed independently, the data suggests that transformational learning through coaching occurs when both elements are present. The first element, establishing a relationship conducive to transformational learning, incorporates building trust, authentic interactions, and a person-centered focus. The second element, transformational coaching practices,

highlights a focus on reflection, question-driven sessions, and accountability-based structure, to encourage transformational learning.

The participants identified the following characteristics as being important to establishing a coaching relationship that would encourage transformational learning: trust, authentic interactions, and a person-centered focus. When participants had a positive encounter with each of these elements, they were more inclined to describe their relationships using transformational language. When the elements were absent or diminished, the participants' descriptions of their experiences were less transformational.

Trust. The first relational condition the participants described as potentially encouraging transformational learning through coaching was the development of trust. Trust was critical to transformative learning because it served as the cornerstone for vulnerability. The principals discussed how, in order to participate in transformational learning, they needed to feel vulnerable in their coaching relationships. The single factor that impacted the principals' sense of vulnerability was the coach selection process. Some of the study participants were assigned coaches, while others were able to select their own coach. The data analysis suggested a connection between the formation of the principal-coach relationship and the level of trust between the participants. The more control the principal had in the selection of the coach, the more authentic the relationship with the coach was perceived, which contributed to a higher level of trust between them. Consequently, those who developed a higher level of trust described their experiences as being more transformational.

For example, Cole was able to select his coach using additional monies allocated to him through his school's designation as a "Focus Campus" by the Texas Education

Agency. “Focus schools are Title I schools ranked by the widest gaps between reading/math performance of the federal student groups and safeguard targets of 75 percent” (TEA, 2017). There are funds allocated to support Focus schools in practices, programs and strategies that improve schools, based on improving student achievement in all student groups. Although he selected someone external to his organization, he indicated he already had a relationship with this person and already had developed a certain level of trust with this coach. Cole was very emphatic that he wanted a coach that did not currently work for the district. He believed there should be a “level of vulnerability that the principal should be comfortable sharing with the coach,” and felt that having a coach internal to the organization would not allow for the vulnerability needed to have open and honest coaching sessions. He referenced the potential for a breach of confidence when describing honesty in the coaching relationship. He felt that assigned coaches may alter their feedback or evaluation of the sessions in ways that principal selected coaches may not. This alteration may result in extra work or other potentially negative employment consequences for the principal. As a result, he explained that a principal in this situation may not be vulnerable or honest enough to create a trusting relationship.

Maria echoed Cole’s sentiment about the importance of playing a role in selecting one’s coach. She felt that being excluded from the decision-making process damaged trust from the outset. When asked about having any input on selecting a coach, Maria recalled:

I would not say we had any input. It was just, your principal is your coach when you are an assistant principal. Then, when you are a principal, you were assigned

a coach from central office. So, we really didn't have input.

Other participants agreed with Maria and Cole that being able to select one's own coach contributed positively to vulnerability and trust. When discussing coaches that are assigned to principals rather than selected by principals, the participants reported having a fear of being vulnerable with the coach, and not wanting to be totally open about themselves or their work. Although Minerva was not able to select her own coach, she believed that the intent of coaching must be made clear and must not include any hidden agendas or motives that sometimes may be present when the coach is also the supervisor of the principal. Maria and Minerva shared the same coaches, internal to the organization, and communicated that they felt their vulnerability was compromised. They may not have received the benefits from coaching they desired to improve their practice and give them confidence in doing their job. When asked to discuss the difference between having a coach who is external to the organization and one who is internal to the organization, Wyatt emphatically stated, "absolutely! I wouldn't have been able to have the same candid conversations with somebody from the district! No way!" Cole had strong feelings about this as well, stating that "my paradigm for this is that means you're going to come tell us what you need to do or tell us what we're doing and tell us what you need to do. That's, to me, not the pure essence of what coaching is or should be."

Authentic interactions. The second condition necessary for a potentially transformational coaching relationship was authentic interactions. The participants described the importance of beginning sessions with conversations around matters other than the meeting agenda, what some commonly referred to as "small talk," as being

essential for authentic interactions. For example, Reese noted that her coach would ask questions about her family and she would reciprocate, by asking about his family. She noted that, until they got to know one another enough to really care and learn about each other's personal life, the interactions seemed artificial. While all relationships do not begin with a high level of trust and authenticity in conversations, all participants reported feeling the need to have authentic, candid conversations with their coaches about their individual experiences and their leadership.

Overall, the participants agreed with Wyatt's insistence that a trusting relationship results when the coach is genuine, "a good listener . . . [and] sincere." He added that the interactions with the coach are much like "guided, informal conversations" that are "true, sincere, and focus on the principal." These authentic interactions were important in the development of the relationship between the coach and the principal, specifically in deepening the level of trust so that the work of principal practices could begin.

Maria commented on how the authenticity of the conversations not only impacted trust, but also the motivation for improving her work. She addressed how a genuine level of authenticity helped hold the principal and the coach accountable to each other through their actions and their behaviors. The presence of this authenticity made Maria "excited, motivated and empowered to come to work." The energy that Maria showed during the interview when she talked about this particular coaching conversation was noticeable with the immediate smile on her face, the sparkle in her eyes and the tone of her voice.

Javier talked about the importance of committing to authenticity. It is not enough to just talk about how important authenticity is to the relationship; one must be willing to participate in it. He indicated that the "coachee has to be open. It's a two-way

relationship and if the coachee isn't in a good space, then even the best intentions of the mentor, or the coach, are not going to be fully realized." He continued, adding personally that "the rapport with the coach is probably what makes the biggest difference [in my learning], followed closely by the relevance of what is being learned." Without this authenticity, the participants described the coaching sessions as a mere compliance activity rather than a professional development opportunity. As Maria put it, having a coach that believes in and cares about her, and growing her as a leader, she shifted her feelings from "dreading to looking forward to sessions."

Person-centered focus. In addition to the need for trust and authentic interactions, the participants described a person-centered approach to coaching as being more transformational. Those who viewed coaching as person-centered described how their experiences positively impacted their self-esteem and confidence, as the focus was on developing the principal as a person, before developing the principals as a leader of a school. When asked about how principals felt about their own growth, all the participants reported that they felt coaching was beneficial in building competence (efficacy) in the job, but even more beneficial in building confidence (esteem) in overall leadership (Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013). Wyatt believed that his coach was competent based on how he carried himself, saying "you can kind of tell how people carry theirself (sic) and how assured they are of what they're saying and how they're doing it . . . and put in the time to do it correctly." Several of the participants felt empowered after coaching sessions because they knew they were growing and gaining clarity about what they did and what they can do. Maria shared that coaching has made a difference in her confidence, as a leader: "I'm not afraid of making a mistake, because if I make a mistake,

we'll work together and come up with a plan or a solution to make it better or fix it.”

Jack expressed the importance of confidence, stating:

I think my confidence is everything, because I know everything I'm doing is because I'm choosing to make a decision or not. Life's about choices, and so in my daily leadership at work, I'm very conscious about how I dress, I'm very conscious.

Maria attributed the development of her confidence to coaching. She reflected on her confidence as a leader, saying that after specific coaching sessions with certain coaches, she felt “six feet tall and bulletproof,” which gave her the confidence to do whatever needed to be done. Bensavio explained how he went through his professional days, saying initially, “I didn't have the confidence, I mean the real confidence, to attack whatever's in front of me. It was just, Oh God! I hope that didn't happen, or I hope that doesn't happen.” But through his coaching experiences, he has developed a level of confidence. “But now, it's, okay,” he remarked, “whatever falls on your path or which way this year turns, okay, we can fix it.” Similarly, Reese expounded that coaching made her feel “empowered” as a principal and allowed her to want to learn and grow. Maria also believed that coaching has boosted her confidence level, which in turn has improved her ability to lead:

The difference in my coaching experiences is definitely my confidence level . . .
There is a difference between accountability and just being told to do something.
We give each other time to process and give each other honest feedback. We've built a relationship where we help one another, it's awesome!

Minerva believed that her competence in her actions affected her confidence in her

leadership and in herself. She learned not to let the little things like pleasing everyone to affect what she does and how she feels about what she does:

The only person I have to please is myself, knowing that I am doing the right things, doing the right things for kids at work, and for my campus. At home, doing the right things for my family. It's just knowing that you've done your best. You've given your all. That's really all that matters. And the other stuff is just inconsequential.

Two of the principals reported that their experience with coaching was more problem-centered, akin to checking topics off a list rather than having a focused conversation about them and their individual needs. When speaking about an experience with a coach who came in with a list of questions for Maria to answer, she shared that “I never felt I had a coach [because I felt] I had someone that was overseeing what I did.” This coach left her with a list of things to do and dates by which to have them done at the end of every coaching session. As a result, she equated her learning through coaching to simply complying with the directives of her coach. Minerva, on the other hand, shared that a problem-centered approach could still be personally beneficial. She stated that focusing on problems, and developing a to do list for the upcoming week helped her to determine what to do, but it was in reflecting on that list, and why those items were on the list that helped her to feel “empowered . . . [to] develop confidence in . . . thought logic, . . . thinking patterns and . . . approach to problem solving.”

Transformational Coaching Practices

The second element of coaching that encouraged transformational learning centered on three specific structural elements: focusing on reflective practices rather than

on strategic practices, focusing on questions rather than on answers, and actively participating in accountability-based structures. When their actual coaching sessions were framed around looking for questions and the practice of reflection, and guided by accountability, the participants described the learning environment as being more transformational than at other times. Although each element on its own was seen as potentially transformational, they were often described together.

Coaching sessions focused on reflective practices. The general approach of reflecting on practices through feedback sessions with a coach is recognized by the American Management Association (2008) as one of the most significant approaches used in professional development of executives and leaders. Each principal interviewed discussed learning about habits of mind, such as reflective practices, as a way of improving his or her leadership. They used different words and phrases to describe this process that eventually became a way of being. For example, when discussing the transformational aspect of his experience, Wyatt described how his coach constantly pushed him to develop the practice of reflection as a necessary quality of leadership. This quality was something that his coach couldn't help him develop during their sessions; it was something he had to develop independently. He noted that "the reflecting continues after the coach leaves, you gotta (sic) think about what you are doing."

Similarly, Bensavio described the transformational nature of reflection as challenging him to be more forward-thinking. His coach would almost always leave him "with something to think about that I had to move forward with." He described how his coach would help him digest on information he had been given during district-level meetings and professional developments. His coach challenged him to look inside of

himself for the answers rather than telling him what to do and coached him through the immediate discomfort. Bensavio admitted that he preferred professional development opportunities that were more passive, what he described as “sit and get” sessions.

Initially, after the first few coaching conversations, he found the coaching process to be worthwhile in the way that it required him to reflect on his own practices rather than to look to someone else for the answers.

Reese described being reflective in all areas of her life as “learning by being different.” She asserted that, “I feel with the coaching I’m learning in a different style.

Like I am planning more about what’s going to happen and I feel like I have more guidance, like more proactive instead of reactive and putting some systems in place.”

Reese added that she has become a more reflective practitioner as a result of her coaching relationship. When asked if she would reflect without her coach asking her to do so, she said “without a coach, I won’t reflect.” She sees reflecting on her practice as a professional development activity that she has to complete for her coach, rather than engaging in reflection of her practice, which is a thinking practice.

When describing what coaching is, Jack shared “coaching is a system that makes you stop and think about what you are doing” and how or if it is yielding the outcomes that were planned for, on a routine basis. When principals have developed and practiced reflection as a habit of mind, they become more intentional not only about what they do, but more importantly, how or why they are doing it. Jack explained that:

Coaching has made me a very intentional person in all parts of my life. I’m intentional. Things don’t just happen, even in my financial life or my spiritual life. Everything is intentional. [My coach] has helped me to create thinking

patterns and thinking habits.

He summed up his coaching experience by expounding “the whole goal is to create thinking habits, like thinking and planning. I’ve learned to think, plan and then move forward; then stop and think, make a plan, to move forward.” Wyatt asserted:

When they do leave, it shouldn’t be over. I mean you’ve gotta think about it.

Even if you have to jot down a note or two, you’ve gotta think about what you are doing. And we’re constantly - every one of us, if we’re in this business - we’re [reflecting on our practice] almost every minute of every day.

Although reflective practices, such as developing thinking habits, promote an effective system of providing feedback to leaders (Goldring et al, 2009; American Management Association, 2008; Goff, et al., 2014; Gray 2006; Schein, 2010) and can positively impact the coaching experience, some of the participants felt their experiences focused more on developing strategic practices. This focus seemed to stifle reflective development, which had a negative impact on learning potential. Maria and Minerva described their experiences with coaching that focused on developing predetermined strategic practices. This focus created an environment that the two described as feeling like the sessions were more of a compliance activity than a practice or thinking habit that would help them to become better leaders. Their coach seemed to be intent on teaching them specific predetermined practices that worked for him. Since these practices worked for the coach, he wanted to impart this knowledge upon the principals he was coaching in an effort to help them to become better leaders, like he believed he was.

Minerva opined, “honestly, I just think coaching is not having some sort of list. Coaching has to be so personalized and individualized for that person.” The implication

in these situations was that success was practically guaranteed; if they did what he did, they would be as successful as he was. Maria echoed this sentiment as well about having her coach communicate what to do, rather than discuss why and how to do it: “I felt I needed more guidance on how to change some of the things that needed to change rather than just being told to change them.”

Coaching sessions focused on questions. Along with a focus on developing reflective practices, the participants mentioned the importance of question-driven meetings. Several participants had experiences with coaching that were focused on getting the right answers rather than reflecting on the right questions. These sessions typically were initiated by coaches that were assigned to principals rather than self-selected by the principals. Cole was very frank and shared that his sessions were focused on a list that was generated by the coach to meet the needs of the coach or the district, and not the needs of the principal. As a result, “growth was not the result of these meetings,” according to Cole. Maria and Minerva shared the same coach for a period of time and recalled the series of questions the coach often asked at the end of each meeting: “Who? Does what? By when?” This staccato burst of questions did not offer any room for reflection but seemed to force the participants into manufacturing answers almost as quickly as the questions were asked. Since transformational learning is often predicated on time allocated for reflective practices, they felt that the immediacy of these questions negatively impacted their ability to adequately reflect.

When the participants felt that the sessions were focused more on questions rather than on answers, they described situations that allowed for more professional reflection. It did not seem to matter who asked the question, only that the question be the focus of

the interaction. When coaches asked questions to better understand the principal and why they made particular choices in their leadership, the participants were encouraged to reflect on what they do, and worried less about whether or not they had the correct answer. When reflecting on questions asked by his coach, Jack recalled that, “she has a way of asking just the right questions at just the right time, so I can get past the barrier.” Most principals found power in asking questions rather than in answering them. Javier believed strongly that “this way of being ensures principals practice being lifelong learners,” explaining how “sharing knowledge is empowering and builds confidence” in principals and thus helps to transform their thinking and practices (Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013). Other participants echoed Javier, describing questions as key to unlocking their potential. A common belief among the participants is that the experience of reflection can change one’s beliefs, and thus help to transform them as individuals and campus leaders.

Likewise, Minerva highlighted the necessity of reflection for transformational learning. She asserted that in order to experience transformational learning, she needed to invest in herself by creating a space for reflection in her day:

I definitely think I am starting [to experience transformational learning]. I think I’m on the path. I’m like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. And it is kind of very similar to her journey, right? You encounter all these challenges and pitfalls along the way. And then what does she learn at the end? . . . [T]hat she had the power all along!

Like other participants in this study, Minerva reports that she has in fact experienced transformational learning because her confidence level in her leadership and decision-

making has improved. Maria describes her experience with coaching and transformational learning by calling it “a light in the darkness.” She recalled and talked about how she learned to have confidence from what she learned about herself and what she knew after her coaching sessions: “I didn’t have the confidence to ask for help. I wasn’t strong enough.”

Accountability-based coaching sessions. In addition to participating in sessions that centered on reflective practices and questions, the principals mentioned the importance of accountability for promoting transformational learning. Jack, who was involved in coaching/principal relationships as both a coach and a principal, shared that he intentionally prepared for each session by “filling out a coaching preparation form that I collaboratively developed with [my] coach some years ago.” He credited this structure with helping him to focus on what he is going to accomplish in the upcoming weeks, as well as how his coach will hold him accountable for the learning. Similarly, Wyatt indicated he was asked by his coach to “set goals, reflect, and look forward . . . [so that I could be a] productive and successful coach myself [and for my staff].”

All participants shared that focused and structured coaching sessions generally gave them more clarity around a particular issue, allowed them to think about how they could respond to an issue, and also perhaps shed light on an area of leadership that needed more attention. Minerva purported the importance of the principal and the coach coming together before each session to “agree on intentions . . . [in order to] maximize coaching effects [and outcomes].” This way of planning allowed her to be ready to “accept feedback better” and be open to asking new questions. Bensavio shared a similar experience with his coach, explaining:

We talked about the things I thought that might be beneficial to me. He would give me some open-ended questions on things and I would talk to him about it and then we would revisit my goals. It's like, how is this going? He'd ask, how's that working?

Reese's experience with unstructured coaching sessions was different than the other participants who had shared experiences among them. She felt that a purposeful lack of structure provided more opportunity to focus on what is immediately important or needed for the principal. When asked about how or if conversations are structured, Reese said:

Pretty much, I lead what I want to talk about. Based on how the school year starts, it may be like, "Hey, what do I do about this teacher?" Like, "How do I deal with keeping the best teacher but also keeping high retention?" Because turnover has been a real big thing for our campus. And so, when he would come we would go to the classes, and he would ask, "This teacher is here (not where she needs to be), but what have you done to support them?" Like "What professional development have you done?" And so, he had me reflect on, instead of looking at not asking her back, what are some things that you and your team have done to support the teacher? This is when it started being more of an accountability piece for me. Instead of saying what they did not do, I had to ask myself what I had done to help this teacher grow. What did I do to set this teacher up for success?

Although this approach is not as focused on a specific outcome, it placed the principal in a position to use the coaching in a way that she believed would benefit her.

Jack added that structuring the coaching conversation around a goal helped him to be “intentional about the results.” Similar to Reese, he stated that the area of focus or particular goals for the coaching session do not necessarily need to be an identified problem or improvement opportunity; it “just has to be something that I want.”

One of the most shared findings about structuring coaching conversations was the importance of the opportunity to reflect on what was going well, what still needed to be fixed, or what was draining their energy. This reflective practice was mentioned by all principals as an absolute necessity in their growth. When coaches planned their questions beforehand and used them to guide the conversation, most of the principals believed that this preparation helped them to reflect on their beliefs and practices in a way that challenged them to grow both personally and professionally. Reflecting through coaching has taught Jack not only to act differently, but to think differently: “It is a different paradigm, instead of hoping that things don’t go wrong, you are planning so that they go correct, the way that you intended them to go.”

Most of the participants shared that their coaching experiences were of the unstructured variety, that the principal and/or the coach may or may not have had an idea of the topic of discussion during their coaching sessions. Participants discussed how this approach negatively impacted their learning because they were unable to address specific needs during the session. Wyatt described how identifying the topic of the discussion, or even identifying particular goals may help both the coach and the principal frame the session in such a way that focuses on a particular issue, area of leadership, or goal. His statement supported the notion that, while coaching is often considered a more open-ended, organic, iterative, principal-driven way of professional development, having a

particular goal or expectation for the session is generally recommended in order to hold the principal and the coach accountable to a particular goal or expectation (Conger & Benjamin, 1999).

Transformational Campus Culture

Principals who have experienced transformational learning from coaching as a professional development strategy are more likely to create a culture where learning is celebrated, reflection is valued, and accountability is honored at the schools they lead.

Culture of learning. The process of learning, or meaning making, involves a progression along inseparable trajectories of participation, reflection, and openness to change, for “learning, transformation, and change are always implicated in one another” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57). In order for change to occur at the campus level, an openness to learning must be modeled and practiced by administration, instructional staff, instructional support staff, parents and students. When a culture of continuous learning is valued by all stakeholders, the campus environment is ripe for learning, thereby setting the stage for transformational learning to occur. Upon reflection, Reece reflected on her experience with coaching and shared that before growing as a principal, we have to be open to learning and open to growth. She states that she has “more of a growth mindset,” which makes her more coachable. This way of thinking about learning does not happen overnight but is cultivated over time. Minerva shared that she is “on the path” to learn more about herself and about people she works with and for: “I just think I am on the beginning pathway . . . I think there’s a lot to learn . . . I feel like you have to be open . . . and truly invested in professional development for yourself.” When leaders model specific values and behaviors, like being open to learning, the staff and students often

take on those same attributes.

Culture of reflection. Reflection is critical for learning and growth, and thus must be valued and practiced at all levels of the learning community in order to implement a culture of reflection at the campus level (Barnett and Mahony, 2006). A structure that creates a space for reflection (Goldring et al., 2009) and journal writing (Aguilar, 2013) can provide the foundation for thinking deeply about experiences, learning, growth and accountability. Many school leaders are often strapped for time and continuously managing a list of things to do, thus feel like spending time reflecting on their practice is a luxury, and often do not build reflecting into their schedule. The criticality of the practice of reflection at schools cannot be understated (Huff et al., 2013) and is key to improving schools in order to effectively improve schools for students (2006). Until principals get comfortable with reflecting on their beliefs and experiences and talking to and working through this with their coach, they will not feel comfortable using it outside of coaching sessions. Jack speaks of coaching and reflection as necessities for his professional and personal growth. This is a practice he finds value in, and this is a practice he utilizes with his staff. He describes coaching as a system that makes him “stop and think on a routine basis.” He creates space in his calendar to reflect and refers to this as creating “thinking habits.” As a campus leader, he builds in time for this into his campus schedule when he has staff meetings, professional development sessions, and the like.

Culture of accountability. Throughout the data gathering process, some principals indicated that they had some input to the agenda for the coaching session, and others did not. Overall, the findings support that it is important to clarify expectations of

the coaching sessions before the session to ensure the coach and the client are focused on the intended outcome (Aguilar, 2013). Jack shared that he fills out a coaching prep form and submits it to his coach a day or two before the call. He says it is his way of taking ownership over the coaching process: “After reflecting and writing about those things, then I can decide what I want the coaching call to be about . . . then, typically, five or ten minutes before the end of the call [my coach] will say, okay, where are we?” This is used as a checkpoint to make sure the coach and client are meeting the intended goals for this particular session. Wyatt also discussed the importance of identifying a particular issue, area of leadership or goal so as to have a productive coaching conversation. This focus helped frame the conversation in such a way that it held the principal and the coach accountable to a meeting a particular goal or planned outcome.

In an effort to intentionally create an environment that has the potential to yield transformational learning of a principal as a result of the coach and coachee relationship, mutual expectations for engaging in coaching must be agreed upon by both the coach and the coachee. This cooperative agreement gives structure needed to ensure accountability measures are used to achieve previously agreed upon goals (Huff et al., 2013). Jack used a coaching planning sheet with his coach, and with principals he coached. He believed this gives him structure to the conversation and allowed him and his coach to evaluate whether or not they achieved what they wanted to achieve from the coaching conversation. It is recommended that principals co-construct a planning form or structure that helps to guide their time together to ensure the discussion is productive and meaningful. This may be something that can be discussed with the external coaches and utilized by the principals to give structure to their conversation. Minerva reported that

one of her coaches has made her accountable by focusing on the work in her role as principal: “She is focused on the institution at hand, like my goals on my campus. How can I be a good leader while I am here and what are the things that need to happen to reach our campus goals.” The goals they have set together keep her accountable for the work she has done, is doing, and will do. Maria recalled her experience with her coach and opined “we always talk about how our beliefs drive our actions, and then we always talk about the see it, own it, solve it, do it piece. After meetings, her teachers always ask or share these questions: Who? Does what? By when?” When teachers are using this language with one another whether or not the principal is in the room, they have definitely embraced accountability for their actions.

Summary

This chapter provided biographical sketches of each principal participant in the study, as well as the findings from the data collected and analyzed to garner the essence of the lived experience of principals engaging in leadership coaching for professional development. The analytical focus of the findings was on how these lived experiences may or may not encourage or provide opportunities for transformational learning. The data suggest that, when coaching as a professional development tool is focused on developing trusting, authentic and person-centered relationships (Sam and Caliendo, 2018), along with practices that encourage reflection, questions, and accountability, transformational learning often occurs (Eastman, 2019). The study participants described other scenarios and experiences with coaching that did not fall into these categories and noted how the presence of these non-transformational elements negatively impacted their relational perspectives as well as their opportunities for learning and growth. By

attending to these six criteria, educational leaders and administrators can provide coaching experiences for principals that engenders transformational learning. The following chapter discusses how educational leaders may begin to develop transformational learning opportunities through coaching.

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This descriptive phenomenological study investigated the phenomenon of coaching as both an approach to principals' professional development and as a vehicle for transformational learning in educational leadership. This particular qualitative method of research was selected because it identifies the essential characteristics of a particular shared experience and describes how these characteristics give the experience meaning and value. Additionally, the lack of extant research on the effects of coaching on transformational learning necessitated a descriptive qualitative focus. In order to more fully understand how coaching might influence transformational learning processes, researchers must first identify and define the phenomenon by describing its essential characteristics (Christensen, Welch, & Barr, 2017). The data collected provided evidence for a rich description of the lived experiences of principals who have engaged in coaching to improve their professional and leadership practices. Transformational learning theory (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008) helped frame the data analysis and provided a lens to examine how transformational learning occurred in principals through coaching when they experienced a change in their beliefs, attitudes and perspectives, resulting in new leadership behaviors (Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019; Mezirow, 2000).

The study focused on the particular experience of coaching, as it has become a widely used reform strategy for school leaders due in part to its success as a professional development strategy for the corporate world (Duncan & Stock, 2010; Reiss, 2015). The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the lived experiences of principals engaging in coaching for their own professional development? How does the

coaching experience contribute to their own transformational learning? Qualitative data from interviews, participant reflective journal entries, and the researcher's journal and field notes were gathered and analyzed to illuminate the essential experiences principals had with coaching.

The findings of this study serve to inform principals, central office administrators and superintendents considering coaching as an approach to principal professional development and transformational learning or their own professional development and transformational learning. Correspondingly, the results may influence how universities prepare principals, how school districts provide support and development for principals, and how principals advocate for this level of support for themselves in order to grow personally and professionally. In addition, it will add to the research that supports the criticality of the need to place resources and structures in place to prioritize professional development for campus principals that is differentiated to meet their needs.

Discussion of Key Findings

This chapter summarizes the characteristics of coaching that impact the effectiveness of coaching as a professional development tool for principals' transformational learning. The goal of professional development for principals is to develop one's ability to learn content that will aid them in having a better understanding of the specific aspects of their job (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). Researchers (Allison, 2011; Farver, 2014; Psencik, 2011) have surmised that reflection and coaching provide individualized learning for individualized needs that principals need in order to respond to the numerous demands on a daily basis. Transformational learning theory (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008; Mezirow, 2000) undergirds this study as coaching requires principals to

reflect on their own beliefs and perspectives (Pettit, 2006) throughout the coaching process. Also key is the fact that coaching, like transformational learning, is a process, (Aguilar, 2013; Ultanir, 2012) rather than an action. Traditional “sell-and-tell” (Tschannen-Moran, 2018, p. 3) approaches of professional development are certainly efficient, as they can target large audiences, but seldom provide individuals with the differentiation and opportunity to reflect on their current practice and learn new leadership behaviors that lead to improved principal and student outcomes. By focusing on the specific elements of coaching that encourage transformational learning, educational leaders may be able to influence principals’ development of these important behavioral changes.

This study explored how principals’ experiences with coaching yielded learning that was transformational (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008; Mezirow, 2000) and leads to a deeper understanding and perspective to change beliefs and behaviors (Pomow, Popp, Broderick, Drago-Severson & Kegan, 1998). The power of transformational learning for principals who are interested in improving their practice lies in the beliefs and attitudes about developing their own learning and being open to growth (Aas et al., 2019; Celoria & Hemphill, 2014). Transformational learning theory supports the idea that when new beliefs, attitudes and perspectives are developed from reflective practices and coaching, the result is a new understanding of self, new beliefs about self as a leader, new leadership behaviors and thus, transformational learning (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008; Mezirow, 2000). This learning is not linear, but cyclical, as the transformational learning process is iterative, building on new knowledge and creating new meaning, that is never-ending (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014). It is important to mention that the horizontalization

portion of the data analysis process was integral in developing the findings of the study. Within horizontalization, tensions were identified within the phenomenon of coaching, as a result of how the principals experienced it. As an example, the tension of asking questions versus answering questions was mentioned by most of the participants in the study. Experiences where principals were being coached by people internal to their current organization shared that conversations were often directive. Often when a question was asked, the coach was looking for a specific answer, and was not interested in utilizing coaching as a process to help the principal problem solve to find the answer. Principals recalled their experiences with questioning and several revealed that when they had conversations where the questions were closed-ended and specific, transformational learning was often absent from this exchange between the coach and the principal. Thus, within an ideal coaching relationship, the principal will ask questions that help the principal see the situation more clearly and ideally, come up with the answer, based on what they already know. Three conclusions can be made based on the thematic findings identified from the data analysis process specifically related to principals' transformational learning through coaching:

1. Coaching relationships that are built on trust, authentic interactions, with a person-centered focus create conditions for transformational learning.
2. Coaching sessions that intentionally focus on reflection, are question-driven, and provide an accountability-based structure promote transformational learning experiences.

3. Principals who have experienced transformational learning from coaching as a professional development strategy are more likely to create a transformational learning culture at the schools they lead.

Finding One: Coaching Relationships that Are Built on Trust, Authentic Interactions, with a Person-centered Focus, Create Conditions for Transformational Learning

After multiple readings of the interviews with principals, their journal reflections and my notes, it was apparent that the foundation of the coach/principal relationship was trust. Coaching as a professional development activity requires principals to be open and honest (Aas et al., 2019) —with their coach and with themselves—in order to truly get to the heart of who they are, why they make certain decisions, and what changes might be needed. Transformational learning theory supports the findings of this study, in that before principals can develop themselves professionally, they need to be open to learning and to the idea that new learning begins with the self (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Within this process, principals must be willing to authentically engage in coaching conversations and be receptive to learning new things about themselves and leadership that challenges their way of being (Aas et al., 2019). “Without a solid foundation of trust and rapport,” Tschannen-Moran (2018) writes, “no coaching alliance can generate a productive and fulfilling change process.” (p. 26). Cole addressed this point succinctly by stating that, “if I don’t trust you, or there is some reason, from an organizational standpoint, or even if the person has betrayed your trust before, it is very difficult to get out of coaching what you could get out of it, potentially.” A trusting relationship must be forged and nurtured so that principals feel comfortable discussing their thinking, beliefs and actions

(Houchens et al., 2017). This necessary level of comfort is what allows them to come to a higher understanding of how and why they think and act in the they do.

Similarly, Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) discuss the power and importance of listening authentically. They describe authenticity in a coaching relationship as being person-centered “listening because you are curious and you care, not just because you are supposed to” (p. 168). When a coaching relationship focuses on authentic interactions between participants, a safe environment is established where open and honest conversation can flourish (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Wyatt described how his coach showed authenticity and sincerity in a way that made it essential to and almost inseparable from trust. Additionally, Bensavio recalled how his coach modeled authentic listening, acutely listening to the conversation and what he was sharing. This authentic way of engaging deepened the level of trust between the participants and their coaches, which in turn affected how well they were able to develop a supportive and potentially transformational relationship.

This study confirmed research suggesting that creating and sustaining an authentic coaching relationship between the coach and the principal requires mutual trust, with an overarching goal on improving the leadership skills and capacity of the principal (Pardini, 2003; Reiss, 2007). When the leadership capacity of the principal expands, so does the achievement capacity of student outcomes (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2004). Wyatt recalled how his coach made him feel like he was important, and his opinions and experiences mattered. When Wyatt and his coach were meeting, his coach consistently focused on him and what he was talking about. He felt that his coach was truly there to help him to grow to be a better principal and focused on

his needs as a principal and as a person. Maria's posture and disposition brightened when discussing this scenario. She contributed her more positive outlook on coaching to her sessions being focused more on her needs and her perceived areas of growth.

In an effort to intentionally create an environment that has the potential to yield transformational learning of a principal, the coach and coachee relationship is of prime importance. Sam and Caliendo (2018) contend that when implementing a promising coaching initiative, it is critical to promote trust and develop strong relationships between the coach and the coachee. Knowing the selection of a coach is key in building a trusting and productive relationship between principal and coach, the supervisor(s) of principals must be aware of this and allow principals to interview several people, before selecting their coach. The purpose and process of selecting a coach must be understood by the principal and their supervisor. Acknowledging that this takes time, the supervisor of the principal and appropriate district leadership must be aware of this and be responsive to the needs of the principal (Psencik, 2011). It is recommended that the principal and their supervisor have a feedback loop established to ensure the needs of the principal are being discussed and met. It may be possible that after a few coaching sessions the principal may decide their coach is not necessarily match for them and may need additional time to interview and select another coach.

Developing an authentic relationship between coach and principal, based on trust, starts with informal conversations regarding common professional experiences and personal connections between the principal and the coach prospect. According to Whitworth, Kimsey-House, and Sandahl (1998), the coach and the principal develop such relationships utilizing a variety of methods, over time (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014). The

desired outcomes must be co-created through powerful questioning, critical reflection and deep listening (Pettit, 2006). When a trusting relationship is absent between coach and principal, emotional safety is compromised and disrupts and may even undo progress of growth of the principal. Also important to consider when intentionally creating an environment that is conducive to transformational learning of principals is the co-creation of goals that seek to increase the capacity of the principal as a person, before increasing the principal as a school leader. This co-constructive work between coaches and principals provides a reciprocal process of personal and professional growth and development (Honig & Ikemoto, 2008). With a focus on person-centered growth, reflection of experiences of the past and present enable the principal to engage in coaching as a process (Aguilar, 2013) to iteratively construct meaning of who they are and who they want to be.

Finding Two: Coaching sessions that intentionally focus on reflection, are question-driven, and provide an accountability-based structure promote transformational learning experiences

Experience with coaching invites principals to engage in reflective practices that allow them to see their own behaviors through a new lens, often leading to a change in beliefs and ultimately in behaviors (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000; Naylor & Keogh, 1999). Coaching encourages principals to ask questions and reflect on their practices, thus making thinking transparent in their search to learn and grow (Eastman, 2019). During coaching sessions, principals reflect on how their behaviors and beliefs influence their leadership practices. Cultivating habits of mind or consistent reflection on one's practice is a large part of the coaching process, yielding personal professional growth.

Minerva shared “the biggest pitfall [administrators make] is when they think that they’ve arrived or they know it all. I just feel like you have to be open to the constant [learning].” When Reese and Jack talked about their experience with coaching, they both described it as an opportunity for professional and personal learning and growth. Minerva brought the second interview to a close with talking about how coaching is not an end, but a means to limitless learning. She likened her coaching experience to the character of Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, learning she had the power and skill to make the decisions she needed to make as an administrator all along, she just needed the confidence to be able to access and use what she already knew. The theoretical framework utilized for this study, transformational learning theory, supports this very idea of changing beliefs and perspectives, to eventually change behaviors as a result of integrating reflective practices, or habits of mind, in their daily life and continued professional development as a school principal (Mezirow, 2000 & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008).

When principals model a process for creating habits of mind to nurture growth, it becomes not only part of who they are, but also important, it becomes a part of the culture of the school (Barnett & Mahoney, 2006). Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh (2018) contend that creating a coaching culture benefits individuals and groups alike. Such culture grows when the environment created is positive and nurturing for members of the organization. A culture in which reflection is common practice for students, teachers, and administrators leads to effective school improvement (2006) and has the potential to impact learning of principals, teachers and students. Reese described her experience with coaching as an award, and something she has the opportunity to do as a part of her participating in a Harvard Leadership Program. Jack valued coaching so

much that he has had a coach for ten years, and even purchased time with a coach for his wife when she turned 50. The power of coaching as a professional development strategy lies within the reciprocity of dialoguing about experience between the principal and coach. This dialogue can be powerful in building principal confidence and competence by laying the foundation to support sustained changes in principal practices (Rhodes and Fletcher, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2018). Within this context, the experiences of the past, present and future intersect to iteratively construct meaning of one's understanding of self, self-efficacy and ultimately leadership ability, through the practice of self-reflection and coaching.

Finding Three: Principals who have experienced transformational learning from coaching as a professional development strategy are more likely to create a culture of transformational learning at the campuses they serve

Coaching is central to the professional development of principals and has the potential to transform principals, leadership practices, thus eventually transforming the organization (Eastman, 2019). Transformational learning occurs when principals understand that coaching within itself is not a transformational practice. Coaching is a process (Ultanier, 2012) that includes reflective practices (Pettit, 2006) such as self-reflection, reflection through engaging in authentic coaching conversations and reflection through journaling (Aguilar, 2013) that often results in constructing new knowledge and new meaning (Naylor & Keogh, 1999), thus creating opportunities for new leadership actions (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014). When principals see value in a particular research-based strategy or practice, it is more likely that they will apply this new learning with teachers, as their coach and leader to support their learning and teaching goals.

Traditional approaches of professional development are certainly efficient, as they can target large audiences, but seldom provide leaders with the differentiation and opportunity to reflect on not only what they do, but why they do it (Psencik, 2011). Sustainable leadership learning that is referred to throughout this study is predicated among strengthening habits of mind that may not be measured by specific answers to specific questions. Leadership that is sustainable refers to the idea that principals will gain confidence and become efficacious (Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013) when they have clarity in their thinking, construct new knowledge, and thus construct new meaning (Naylor & Keogh, 1999). When principals experience professional development that is differentiated to meet their particular needs (Psencik, 2011) the result often leads to higher levels of confidence (Aguilar, 2013), which often results in principals staying on the job for a longer period of time. Conversely, when learning centers on habits of mind, the outcome is learning to ask questions (of self), and talk about the possibilities (Tschannen-Morran, 2018).

Rolfe, Jasper, and Freshwater (2011) contend that spending time thinking deeply and critically is a practice school leaders cannot afford not to do. When the campus leader values and regularly engages in reflective practices, they will be more inclined to utilize such practices with staff and may quite possibly create a culture in which reflection is common practice for students, teachers, and administrators. Barnett and Mahoney (2006) assert a culture of reflection leads to school improvement and has the potential to impact the transformational learning of all stakeholders (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019).

Implications

Quality principal preparation programs and professional development programs for practicing principals are needed to develop exceptional principals who are able to provide a vision to guide the direction of the school, provide the support needed to develop teachers and staff in order to provide differentiated instruction and support to develop all learners (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014). Although coaching support for principals is gaining traction as a viable school improvement strategy needed for principals, there is not a dearth of research available to speak to the effectiveness of particular coaching methods or programs that are being utilized (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009; Bozer & Sarros, 2012; Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010). There has been recent research that reflective practices, found in coaching, speak to the increase in efficacy and confidence of the principals as they gain confidence in their practices, leadership (Aas et al., 2019) and overall personal and professional development of metacognitive skills.

Transformational learning shifts problematic frames of reference that may have been limiting, narrow in scope and uneasy with change into more inclusive, discriminating, reflective and open to change (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. 49). The benefit of shifting a frame of reference often results in a shift in new beliefs, actions and outcomes. Psencik (2011) confirms that leadership coaching for principals provides professional development that is differentiated for their specific needs and focused support in developing and applying leadership skills to “change behaviors, build confidence, and find the courage” to lead (p. 13). When such a change in beliefs and perspectives is experienced, new ways of thinking and behaving emerge, thus revealing

transformational learning (Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Eastman, 2019).

There is a plethora of resources that discuss the layered benefits of strategic investing in the professional development of principals (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Investing in school leaders underscores the impact a principal can have on school culture, teacher quality (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Beteille, 2012) teacher retention (Kraft, Marinell, & Shen-Wel Yee, 2016) and ultimately, student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004; Anthony & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Recent research on principal preparation and development programs outlines the following as key aspects of programs that effectively improve school outcomes:

1. Organizational partnerships that support learning for teachers and principal programs structured to support learning
2. Meaningful and authentic learning opportunities
3. Learning opportunities focused on what matters (Sutcher, Podolsky, & Espinoza, 2017)

School districts have federal funds available through Every School Succeeds Act that can be used to develop teachers and principals. Investing in school leaders is necessary for strategic school improvement and critical to the redesign of school systems that our students need and deserve.

The notion that school leaders want and need real-time professional development, or real-time feedback on their practice, speaks to the fact that they know they need to continue to grow and develop as leaders, in order to grow and develop their teachers. Partnerships between universities, education service centers, and coaching professional development programs and school leaders would provide opportunities for coaches in

training to provide principals in training, or principals real-time feedback to guide principals to reflect on their practice in an effort to change thinking and eventually change leadership behaviors. Coaches in training will have the opportunity to practice with principals and get feedback on their coaching skills from their program leaders. Principals will benefit from this by making time to reflect on their practice, talk about their thinking and their leadership actions and hopefully, eventually, talk about and actually change their leadership. Creating an environment that values reflective learning and growing of principals, provides a safe space for principal feedback to teachers for their own growth and development, knowing their growth influences the growth of students (Anthony, & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Priest and Middleton's (2016) recent work declares, "being clear about who you are—will inform whether you engage in development and how you go about developing . . . we suggest that a person with strong self-awareness and leader identity would be more motivated to develop as a leader as well as to pursue leadership opportunities" (pp. 45-46).

This study examined principals' experiences with coaching and its potential for contributing to transformational learning of principals. This research can inform principal preparation programs, principal development programs, principals, central office administrators, superintendents, and other educational leaders considering coaching as an approach to principal professional development and transformational learning. In fact, this study has already impacted my practice as a school superintendent of a PK - 12 district. As of fall 2019, upon completing this dissertation, I helped ensure that our district provided the opportunity for our principals and assistant principals to engage in coaching as professional development that is differentiated to meet their needs.

All campus leaders are engaging in one to two coaching sessions a month, with sessions lasting from 30 minutes to one hour in length. The district has had significant turnover of school leadership in the last ten years, thus we are utilizing coaching as a school improvement strategy and as a human resources strategy.

As superintendent, now in my second year, I have also been working with a coach, and will continue to do so. I have had informal coaching sessions in the past as a school and district leader. However, this is the first time I am paying a coach for their services in an effort to be a better learner and leader.

Additionally, this work may also serve to influence and impact principals to stay on the job longer as it aims to harness their confidence, competence and ultimately, improve schools and increase student achievement. Finally, this research adds to coaches' understanding of how principals experience coaching and may serve to influence how they coach principals.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was conducted to identify those aspects of principal coaching as a professional development tool that may encourage transformational learning. This study was intentionally descriptive, as there is not yet an extensive collection of research on the lived experiences of principals' transformational learning through coaching. Future research opportunities are needed to:

1. Research the possible connections between principals' transformational learning and student outcomes.
2. Research the impact of the variety of coaching methods on principals' transformational learning (blended, etc.).

3. Research on the impact of transformational learning through coaching on culturally relevant leadership.

A study that measures and compares the degree to which transformational learning has on student outcomes would be a great study for practitioners who are no longer in an elevated status of concern, in terms of state and/or accountability. Engaging in data collection for this could be a powerful tool for large and small school districts to measure the success of a particular school improvement strategy. Research regarding the impact of different coaching models on the transformational learning of principals would also be important for the field of leadership development. The question of which methods or model will be most effective is of prime importance to schools, districts and school systems. Consider that a majority of principals across the country are white and the student population is increasing in diversity.

Although there were limitations of this study, due to my positionality as the researcher, a certified coach and superintendent of schools, I believe this study would be beneficial to superintendents who are looking to align resources with practices that are impactful for personal and professional growth for principals and or any leader looking to improve in the areas they guide, lead or support. The purpose for doing this work is to lay the foundation for utilizing principal coaching, teacher coaching and peer coaching for teachers in order to improve all stakeholders in school districts.

Knight (2011) writes about the importance of doing this work and interacting with others, especially in a coach and coachee relationship, so that the interactions are mutually beneficial. Although the coaching he was referring to was for teachers, one can extrapolate that Knight's principles will also be applicable to school principals receiving

coaching. The findings of this study support the research Knight has done on coaching. He writes about his theory of interaction and shares his seven partnership principles that are used to guide coaches in navigating this coach/coachee relationship. The underlying theory is that we act based on what we believe, so he developed these seven principles to give us a language from which to speak and share information about when referring to coaching. The first three principles align with the first finding in this study—coaching relationships that are built on trust, authentic interactions, with a person-centered focus, create conditions for transformational learning. This study also found that the relationship between the coach and the principal is of prime importance for laying the foundation of transformational learning, via coaching. I found that developing a relationship built on trust through authentic interactions and a person-centered focus often produces a fertile space for transformational learning to occur.

Knight's first principal of equality is rooted in the fact that in a coaching relationship, there is nobody that is above anyone else. Both the coach and the coachee are equally important and both listen to the other with attentiveness. The second principle is choice. Both partners choose the goals that they want to achieve and have a choice in deciding what practices they want to adopt. This study also found that when principals were able to choose their coach, they were able to be more vulnerable and honest with themselves and their coach to get to the core of the issue(s) that is keeping the principal from moving forward with a decision, an activity or an idea. Violation of this principle is often a guarantee that the new practice will not be adopted. Having a choice in selecting their coach allows the principals to begin the coaching process by actively engaging in choosing someone they already believe in and trust, or someone they

respect and will be able to eventually trust.

The third principle is voice. When people seek out what they think they need, they will be more likely to implement the new learning. If they do not have a voice, they will not be motivated to take action or learn. I found this to also be true in my study. The coaching relationship should be focused on the principal's needs. In order to do this, the principal needs to communicate such needs to the coach to ensure that coaching sessions make a connection to the principal need. At the same time, coaches need to ensure they are providing a space through coaching in which a coachee can express their needs, or voice.

Knight has identified reflection as the fourth principle, noting the criticality it plays in implementing new ideas or changes. It is based on the idea that the coaching relationship is a partnership, a meeting of the minds and that the coach and the coachee are co-creators of ideas to implement. This relates to the second finding of this study—coaching sessions that intentionally focus on reflection, are question-driven, and provide an accountability-based structure promote transformational learning experiences. Most of the participants in this study identified the need to co-create a plan for the coaching session. The idea that having a coach resulted in accountability for carrying out plans discussed during coaching sessions was deemed important for principal growth. Without a stated goal, plan or outcome, coaching conversations were merely conversations with a coach that would not usually result in a change of beliefs, perspectives or behaviors.

The next principle is dialogue and it supports the second finding mentioned earlier and operates under the assumption that the best idea (from the coaching conversation) gets implemented, only after having a dialogue about the idea and exploring other options

to try as well. Freire's writing lays the groundwork for this principle, valuing two-way communication more than one-way communication and honoring the idea of speaking with humility, listening to others' ideas before sharing our own in an effort to speak with "radical honesty" (p. 20). Engaging in coaching dialogue invites focused and scheduled conversations between a coach and a principal in an effort to develop leadership skills and capacity (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016). These regularly scheduled conversations help to clarify thinking and beliefs of the principal so that his/her behavior is intentional and focused on the right thing, at the right time. Such dialogue helps to develop knowledge for the principal (Celoria & Hemphill, 2014).

The sixth principle is praxis and supports the third finding in this research study—principals who have experienced transformational learning from coaching as a professional development strategy are more likely to create a transformational learning culture at the schools they lead. Praxis refers to the act of implementing new knowledge and skills and thinking about this new knowledge in a deep way. Principals who implement their learning from the coaching process are more apt to create a habit of mind that often leads to a change in beliefs, perspectives, and behaviors, and ultimately, transformational learning. Without implementation of the new learning, it remains a concept, an idea or something to try. Coaching as an approach to professional development involves implementing new learning and reflecting on the implementation of the new learning in order for deeper learning to transpire.

The final principle is reciprocity and speaks to the mutual benefit from engaging in this process, as partners. The partnership he speaks of underscores the value of shared learning, along with shared power to learn. This idea that the reciprocity between the

coach and principal lays the foundation for transformational learning of the principal, and the creation of a transformational culture of the school. When principals see the value in reflecting on their beliefs, perspectives and actions they are more likely to embed reflective practices in their leadership and intentionally create a transformational learning culture in their schools.

Knight (2011) proposes that coaching should be a part of all professional learning, in every profession, and especially in education. He suggests that coaches recruit teachers by explaining to them about the benefits of coaching and how it is a way for them to get and value professional development that is tailored especially for them. The beneficiary of the coach, be it a principal, assistant principal, a teacher, a coach, will understand that engaging in the coaching process will benefit them by inviting them to be a partner in designing the professional development they need, based on their input and data that is available for consideration. If the information about coaching is communicated in a way that highlights the benefits to the coachee, they will choose to work with a coach, and not be told to do so.

Summary

The principals experienced coaching in similar, and not so similar ways. There are many variables present in how they experienced coaching. Inviting principals to tell stories about their experience with coaching underscores the need for principals to talk about their practice, and more importantly, to reflect on their practice. Notwithstanding, changes in and improvement of professional and personal confidence (Rhodes & Fletcher, 2013) was definitely the common experience that all participants shared. Several participants described the principalship as feeling like you are on an island. Cole

describes the job of a principal as a “very lonely, lonely place”. Having someone that you trust, and schedule conversations with, on a regular basis, whose job it is to listen to you with intent, gives principals the permission to create the space for coaching conversations, that over time, may result in transformational learning.

The quality of professional development for principals is critical, as empirical research indicates, “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5) and plays a key role in school improvement (Kimball, Heneman III, & Milanowski, 2007). This direct correlation between leadership and student achievement underscores the need for professional development for principals that is relevant to their needs and is on-going, held on-site, and embedded within the daily work of principals, according to the National Staff Development Council (Sparks & Hirsch, 2000).

I conclude that participating in coaching creates the opportunity for principals to engage in authentic interactions and purposeful conversations with coaches with whom they have developed a trusting relationship with and understand the job of the principal. This research reinforces the importance of support for principals that is differentiated to meet their individual needs (Silver et al., 2009), involves aspects of critical reflection (Huff et al., 2013), and feedback as an indispensable part of the coaching process (Goff, et al., 2014). Changing how we believe, think, and feel definitely impacts how we act and show up in this world. Many of the participants in this study reported learning about the importance of reflecting on their practice. Most of them purported to have become a much more confident person and leader. Out of all the participants, Maria spoke primarily about how she believed her confidence in herself had transformed her

leadership, asserting, “my learning . . . leading . . . it’s [positive outcomes] trickling down to the students.” Through this process, principals learned how they could and should intentionally create a space and time to reflect on their thinking and actions. It is through these reflective practices that they gained courage and confidence in their decision-making to be able to implement new actions or behaviors needed to make progress in their own leadership development and eventually, in school outcomes (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; James-Ward & Potter, 2011). There is abundant research to suggest that coaching for principals has the ability to transform leaders and schools (e.g., Finn et al., 2007; Grant et al., 2009; James-Ward, 2011; Wise & Jacobo, 2010) by providing a platform in which leaders can reflect on their beliefs and behaviors through regular, reflective conversations with coaches (Goldring et al, 2009).

According to Jack, coaching helped him to create a space for thinking and planning. He felt his coach had helped him to create “thinking patterns and habits” and get exactly what he needed, which was professional and personal development. These experiences highlight an understanding of transformational learning that begins with the development of the self (Kouzes & Posner, 2011), based on the belief that learning “results in a change in how we see ourselves” (Malik, 2016, p. 49). It is through these habits of mind that leaders engaging in coaching as a form of professional learning and development experience high levels of personal and professional confidence and like Maria, felt “six feet tall and bulletproof!”

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION EMAIL

To:

From: Diana Barrera

BCC:

Subject: Research Participation Invitation: Illuminating the Coaching Experiences of Principals

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Hello Principal,

My name is Diana Barrera, and I am conducting a qualitative research study in partial fulfillment for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Education at Texas State University. The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of principals in Central Texas who have been coached as part of their professional development to understand how principal coaching may contribute to transformational learning.

Participants for this study were selected from various PK-12 school districts in Central Texas who meet the following primary criteria for study inclusion: (a) Participants must be principals, (b) participants must have experienced coaching for at least one year (preferably at least 10 coaching sessions), (c) participants selected must receive coaching from an internal or external (from their district) coach (d) participants selected must be geographically situated within a 90 mile radius of San Antonio, Texas or

Kenedy, Texas. I live and work in Kenedy, Texas during the week. However, my permanent residence is in San Antonio, Texas.

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

- Two 60-90 minute face-to-face, audio-recorded interview
- Two written reflections (one after each interview)

To participate in this research or ask questions about this research, please contact Diana Barrera at (210) 324-2956 or at dlb250@txstate.edu. This project [#6122] was approved by the Texas State IRB on October 31, 2018. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert (512-245-8351; dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzalez, IRB Regulatory Manager (512-245-2334; meg201@txstate.edu).

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Study Title: Illuminating Principals' Transformational Learning during Coaching Experiences

Principle Investigator: Diana Barrera

Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr. Melissa A. Martinez

Investigator will collect consent forms.

- “Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.”
- “The purpose of this interview is to talk about the experience you have had with coaching. Specifically, I want to understand how you experience coaching as an approach to your professional development and how it contributes to your transformational learning. The underlying assumption that we are working with is that strong principal leadership contributes to positive student outcomes. Coaching is a form of professional development that principals utilize to improve their leadership. That is why I am talking with you, because you too are using coaching as an approach to your own professional development. I want to hear from you and the experience you have had with coaching, from your perspective as a school principal.
- “I’d like to remind you that to protect the privacy of interview members, all transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms.
- “The interview will last between one to one and one-half hours and with your permission, I will audiotape the discussion to make sure that it is analyzed accurately.”
- “Do you have any questions for me before we begin?”

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

Interview 1

1. Tell me about how you came to be a principal.

Probe: Share a story about a person or experience that inspired you to go into the principalship.

2. What has been your experience as a principal?

Probe: Share feelings you have about being a principal, and explain where those feelings come from.

Probe: Talk about your particular experience as a principal at this campus.

3. What is a coach?

- a. How would you define/describe a coach?
- b. What are characteristics of a coach?

4. Describe how you came to have a coach?

Probe: Why did you get a coach? Who chose the coach? Why was this particular coach selected?

5. Describe a typical coaching session.

6. Who decides topics of discussion with your coach?

Probe: How are topics of discussion during coaching sessions determined?

7. What are examples of coaching sessions that you determine to be successful?

Probe: Describe a good coaching session – what made it good? Describe a bad coaching session – what made it bad?

8. Describe your general feelings after coaching sessions.

9. As you reflect on your coaching experiences, what patterns emerge?
10. Do you believe participating in coaching has been fruitful? Why or why not?
11. Is there anything you would like me to know about your experience with the coaching process?

Interview 2- Review the Interview Script to reiterate the purpose of the research, how it will be collected, and how the participant's confidentiality will be maintained.

Although there has been increasing research on the use of coaching as a professional development strategy for principals, research regarding how it contributes to transformational learning of principals and models has been sparse.

1. After your coaching sessions, do you typically reflect on what was discussed?

Probe: Is principal coaching a compliance activity or a practice you engage in to help you reflect on your practice as a leader? Explain the difference between the two.

2. How, if at all, has coaching changed what you know personally and/or professionally? Why do you think this is so?
3. How (if at all) has coaching impacted your attitude about yourself, your leadership, your staff and your campus? Why do you think this is so?
4. How has your perspective changed as a result of your experience with coaching?

Probe: Finish these sentences: When I think about coaching, I used to think . . . now I think . . . Why do you think this is so?

5. How (if at all) has coaching changed what you do or how you do things in your role as a principal? Why do you think this is so?
6. What do you appreciate most about participating in coaching sessions?

7. What would you change about your coaching sessions to make them more meaningful and effective?
8. Who do you think would benefit from coaching? Why?
9. What is your understanding of transformational learning?
 - a. To what extent do you feel coaching has provided you with a transformational learning experience? How and why?
10. Is there anything else you want me to know about how you experienced coaching as a form of professional development?

APPENDIX D

PROMPTS FOR REFLECTIONS

After the first interview:

In reflecting about the interview regarding your experience with coaching yesterday, how do you think this experience has contributed to your professional development as a leader? Describe any thoughts or reflections you had after the session.

After the second interview:

In reflecting about the experiences with coaching you shared during the interview, how, if at all has coaching transformed your learning and practice as a leader? Share any personal/professional examples of this. What final thoughts do you have about your experience with coaching as an approach to your professional development?

APPENDIX E



INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Illuminating Principals' Transformational Learning during Coaching Experiences

Principal Investigator: Diana Barrera

Email: dlb250@txstate.edu

Phone: (210)324-2956

Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr. Melissa A. Martinez

Email: mm224@txstate.edu

Phone: (512)245-4587

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a research study to 1. Learn more about the lived experiences of principals in Central Texas who utilize coaching as an approach for their own professional development; and 2. Understand how engaging in the practice of coaching contributes to transformational learning. You are being asked to participate because you are a principal participating in coaching.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

- Two 60-90 minute face-to-face interviews
- Two written reflections (one after each interview)

I will set up a meeting at a mutually agreeable time and place. You will first complete list process and duration (i.e the survey and then participate in the interview for a total of 45 minutes of participation.). During the interviews, you will be asked to talk about your experiences with coaching. The interview will be audio-recorded and I may take notes as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There are minimal risks/discomforts associated with participating in this study. The interview will include discussions of your experiences with coaching. In the event that some of the questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel the need to seek counseling services, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association and Texas Association of Secondary Principals and Supervisors Association are two resources for Texas Principals.

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may serve to communicate the criticality of coaching as a form of professional development for principals that can contribute to school improvement and transformational learning.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team, and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

You do not have to participate in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Should you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Diana Barrera at 210-324-2956 or at dlb250@txstate.edu. This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date].

Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – (dgober@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Printed Name of Study Participant

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

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