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## Leader Developers: Perspectives of Mentor Principals in an Administrator Preparation Program

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# **Leader Developers: Perspectives of Mentor Principals in an Administrator Preparation Program**

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## **Abstract**

Principal preparation programs use various components to develop candidates, including course work, core assessments, and field-based internships or practicums. The internship represents an exceptionally high leverage learning opportunity (Lochmiller, 2014). The success of the internship depends highly on the abilities of a mentor via informal instructional supervision. Mette (2020) explains that supervision has a potential transformational quality. This study explores mentorships in a university principal preparation program through the mentor's perspective. We interviewed a sample of mentors nominated as effective by peer and program informants. We learned that mentors were deliberate in developing three specific skills -- metacognitive ability, developmental efficacy, and learning-oriented goal setting. Mentor principals described these three elements as paramount to master before becoming a principal. We discuss implications for principal preparation programs to use mentors as informal instructional supervisors and develop highly effective school principals.

## **Keywords**

mentorship; clinical supervision; practicum; leadership; principals

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## **Introduction**

An ever-growing body of research suggests that effective leadership is critical to a successful school community. As the building leader, principals play a vital role in school improvement (Leithwood & Louis, 2011). A recent synthesis of six major panel studies, accounting for 22,000 principals across four states and two urban districts, found strong causal evidence of how principals' matter (Grissom et al., 2021). The authors report that "a 1 standard deviation increase in principal effectiveness increases the typical student's achievement by 0.13 standard deviations in math and 0.09 standard deviations in reading" (p. xiii). But not all principals are created equal, and many require significant skill development to become effective leaders (Quebec Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020).

Identifying the essential curriculum of educational leadership programs has been a discussion point for the last twenty years (Clayton et al., 2013; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Sanzo & Scribner, 2015). Principal candidates experience preparation differently (Hess & Kelly, 2005; Eadens & Ceballos, 2022) and in ways that may not yield effectual leadership (Orr, 2011; Virella & Cobb, 2021). As a result, the field of principal preparation continues to seek improvement in developing future school leaders.

Successful university preparation programs aim to equip aspiring school principals with the knowledge and skills to manage the organization and provide effective instructional leadership to increase the academic achievement of all students (Conley, 2010; Garza et al., 2014; Gronn, 2003; Jean-Marie et al., 2009). Key features of effective principal preparation programs include quality internships, active learning strategies, and knowledgeable faculty (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Orr, 2011). Arguably, the internship component has the most potential influence on preparing candidates for their first real leadership position (Conley, 2010; Daresh, 2004; Lochmiller, 2014).

The success of the internship depends on the quality of the mentor who acts as a facilitator of learning and informal supervisor (Alexander, 2019). Supervision has a potential transformational quality (Mette, 2020). However, few programs provide formal training for their mentors (Lochmiller, 2014) and those that do give direction to varying degrees. Some mentor principals are given checklists of activities the intern should complete, while others are asked to create conditions for learning specific leadership competencies.

The present study offers insights into how a sample of reputable mentors contribute to the development of pre-service school leaders. It examines how mentors approach preparing principals to lead schools through school improvement efforts and help prepare them for the complex realities of the job.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Critical Importance of Supervision on Principal Development**

The principalship is a complex job; thus, supervision allows aspiring leaders to test drive skills and scenarios learn from highly skilled leader mentors. Only a handful of studies have focused

on the practices principal supervisors use to enhance the development of the leadership capacity of aspiring leaders (Cottrell, 2010; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Mendels, 2016). These studies have identified some notable practices implemented by principal supervisors that strengthen an aspiring leader's skills. These practices include coaching, modeling, providing professional development, collaborating through joint work, differentiating support, and conducting campus and classroom walk-throughs.

Researchers found (Casserly et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; Thessin et al., 2018) that coaching and modeling emerged as a practice employed by principal supervisors to support a leaders' growth. For example, a study by Thessin et al. (2018) found that district leaders coached principals to develop a principal's capacity by engaging in one-on-one coaching. Similarly, other studies also identified coaching as a high-leverage practice used by principal supervisors (Casserly et al., 2013; Goldring et al., 2018). The literature on principal supervision provides insights into mentoring aspiring leaders.

Aspiring principals require support such as learning experiences, reflection, and coaching from mentors to meet the demands of the job. Cottrell (2010) posits that mentors can set up experiences for their intern or mentee to facilitate professional learning and reflection. Experiences can be meeting with an expert in the field, collaborating with staff or faculty on a project, or other worthwhile endeavors. The intern and the mentor learn from the experience when the intern reports back to the mentor. This time of reflection is just as necessary for the mentor as it is for the intern. Similarly, Dunaway et al. (2010) studied responses from 160 principal interns, reporting that interns learn more when allowed to learn by working on activities that require their contribution instead of solely observing. They also recommend placing interns in leadership and management activities. We posit that the internship has critical significance for aspiring leaders through effective strategies employed through supervision.

Within many principal preparation programs, the internship (also referred to as a clinical experience or practicum) is used for aspiring school-level leaders to acquire experiences that will ready them for their future position. Strong internships can connect theory to practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The types of activities candidates engage in during an internship vary across and even within programs (Kappler-Hewitt et al., 2020). Internships are typically part-time and done on the candidate's own time; full-time residencies are the rare exception. The location of the internship varies, as some candidates work within their own home school or district, while others are assigned to an outside school district. Candidates are assigned to the internship school's principal, who serves as a mentor during the internship. Mentors informally supervise and facilitate field-based learning activities.

### **The Influence of Principal Mentorship**

Research has found mentorship to be a critical component in leadership preparation through its skill-building and socialization to the leadership role (Daresh, 2004; Parylo et al., 2012; Sackney & Walker, 2006; Zhang & Brundrett, 2010). A 2006 literature review found that pre-service principal mentorships help develop several skills and habits of mind, including collaborative problem-solving, reflection, empathy for various stakeholders, and improved confidence (Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). Further, principal mentors contribute to positive reinforcement,

reduced loneliness, and provided career affirmation. The process of mentoring also benefits not only mentees, but mentor principals as well (Aravena, 2018; Bush & Coleman, 1995; Sezgin et al., 2020).

Many graduates' point to internships as being highly influential to their learning (Lester et al., 2011); however, the mentorship experience has rarely been studied as a lead driver of principal preparation programs. Instead, research on principal preparation programming has focused on the coursework as the primary method of training (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Our study adds to the body of the literature by examining the mentorship practices of a sample of mentors nominated as being successful in this role.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For this study, we used the conceptual framework of "leader developers" to examine how mentor principals in a university principal preparation program foster leadership skills among aspiring principals (Avolio & Hannah, 2008, 2009; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). This framework centers on the notion that aspiring leaders' efficacy can be accelerated if learning experiences align with the aspiring leader's developmental readiness (Avolio & Hannah 2008; 2009). The notion is akin to meeting the mentee in their 'zone of proximal development' (Hopson & Sharp, 2005; Vygotsky

**Table 1. Definitions of the 5 Constructs Used in Avolio and Hannah's Framework for Leader Developmental Readiness**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Learning Goal Orientation</b>	"Learning goal orientation represents whether individuals engage in tasks focusing on achieving a certain performance standard or, conversely, to learn and develop (Button, Matieu, and Zajac, 1996)" (p. 336).
<b>Developmental Efficacy</b>	"Leaders' developmental efficacy represents their level of confidence that they can develop a specific ability or skill for employment in a specific context or leader role" (p. 337).
<b>Self-Awareness and Clarity</b>	"A heightened sense of self-concept clarity, defined as "the extent to which self-beliefs (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141), will promote greater developmental readiness and leader development" (p. 338).
<b>Metacognitive Ability</b>	"Metacognitive ability is how one is thinking about their thinking (Metcalf and Shimamura, 1994). This form of "second-order" thinking entails awareness of one's cognitive processes, cognitive strengths and weaknesses, and cognitive self-regulation" (p. 340).
<b>Self-Complexity</b>	"Self-complexity can be measured through an unrestricted trait sort (Q-sort) method as pioneered by Linville (1987), where participants are instructed to create self-aspect categories (i.e., social roles such as "team leader") and then use blank cards to list attributes they perceive themselves to possess within each category" (p. 347).

& Cole, 1978). Kegan and Lahey (2009) emphasized the necessity for developmentally appropriate experiences for aspiring leaders to have meaningful experiences to lead effectively.

The leader development readiness framework itself is grounded in five specific constructs (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). These include learning goal orientation, developmental efficacy, self-concept clarity, self-complexity, and metacognitive ability (Table 1). Central to the leader developer framework is the notion of accelerating leader development.

The leader developer framework helped guide our data collection, providing an opportunity to understand the extent to which mentor principals thought about developing their mentees. Avolio and Hannah (2008) recommend a few ways to align teaching to the five constructs for leader development such as setting long and short-term goals, modeling, and guided reflection (Table 2). We used these recommendations to further assist in our analysis of the mentorship activities principals used in their mentorship.

**Table 2. Recommendations to Teach the Five Constructs**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Teaching Recommendation</b>
<b>Learning Goal Orientation</b>	Set short- and long-term goals. Celebrate success and failures. Reflection on realistic performance feedback.
<b>Developmental Efficacy</b>	Role modeling and vicarious learning experiences that challenge mental models.
<b>Self-Awareness and Clarity</b>	Problem-solving or other activities that encourage rumination
<b>Metacognitive Ability</b>	Guided reflection through prompting.
<b>Self-Complexity</b>	Conduct pencil and paper measure such as a Q-sort.

In this study, we examine how the mentors describe their mentorship and made sense of them in the context of Avolio and Hannah's (2008) framework. Sensemaking theory posits that making sense of information and ideas is an iterative, ongoing process. We relied on Spillane et al.'s (2002) sensemaking typology of the three concomitant elements: 1) prior knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, 2) the social context of the work, and 3) connection with the message. According to Spillane et al. (2002), prior knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes manifest in how principals make sense of their intellectual, professional, and cultural histories which may influence a new idea they take up in their leadership. The social context of the work, according to Spillane et al. (2002), argues that principal's social context of work is not only a backdrop in the sensemaking process, but a constituting element. Finally, in their typology, Spillane et al. (2002) argue that the messages principals receive can enable or constrain their sensemaking ability by limiting an understanding of the broader picture. Given that mentors in a principal preparation program are navigating both the university expectations as informal supervisors and their formal role as principals of their school, we believe it was important to understand how they navigate the duality of these roles while preparing an individual for leadership.

## Methods

For this study, we used an exploratory case study design (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2016) to analyze the role of the mentor within an internship experience. This methodological approach is appropriate because exploratory case studies aim to gain insights from studies with small sample sizes (Creswell, 2018). Case studies also provide insights into an enhancement of the current theory (Tracy, 2013). The following research questions guided our study:

1. How do principal mentors prepare aspiring leaders to develop leadership competence?
2. To what extent do principal mentors use developmental readiness within their mentorship practice?

## Setting

The study was conducted in a public university principal preparation program in the northeast. The program enrolls roughly 40 candidates per year and assigns them to smaller size cohorts based on location. Throughout the two-year program, students participate in course work as well as a structured, field-based internship experience. Internships require the student to set aside time to work on-site and remotely. During the internship, candidates are asked to engage in eight core internship experiences in each year of the program. For example, in Year 1, they are required to analyze student discipline data and engage the staff in a review of the school's practices and student behavior expectations. Fundamental to the internship are four project-based leadership tasks, which are deliberately sequenced and integrated with coursework. They include such tasks as conducting an organizational culture and climate diagnosis and leading a school change project.

The internship is led by a mentor principal and supported by a university leadership coach. Mentor principals are selected by the program based on their abilities and performance as school leaders. The pool of mentor's numbers around 50, although not all are active at the same time. The program has identified this cadre of mentors in recent years because they have (a) demonstrated success leading their school and (b) emphasized equity and access for all students.

At the beginning of the program, each candidate is assigned a leadership coach and a mentor principal. The coaches are hired and trained by the university preparation program. Mentor principals receive no formal training from the program but are given guidance on how to structure learning experiences for candidates. Candidates work with their leadership coach to develop a personalized leadership growth plan; this plan guides and prioritizes key elements of their leadership development. The plan is also shared with the mentor principal to help inform authentic learning experiences in the field.

Mentors work with university coaches and the intern to develop and meet the objectives of a personalized learning plan aligned with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and state leadership standards. Mentors also support the student in completing the program's internship experience requirements and participate in regular meetings with the intern and/or with a university leadership supervisor. Beyond these structured arrangements, mentors use their discretion to meet student learning needs best.

## Participants

Participants in our study were chosen purposefully using a nomination method. To identify “successful” mentors, we asked five long-term instructors of the program to name mentor principals they deemed “effective” in this role. To provide more definition to what we intended by effective, we encouraged nominators to consider the extent to which mentors had a consistent track record with their mentees in terms of obtaining an administrative job soon after graduating. And further, we asked them to consider how the students themselves viewed their mentorship experience and specifically the role of their mentor. The instructors were familiar with their students and had information, albeit informal, about how much mentees attributed their learning, growth, and success to their principal mentorship relationship.

In the end, six nominators identified one mentor each – some of whom were named by multiple nominators. Notably and unexpectedly, some of the mentors had not been in a mentorship role for long. The set of mentors worked in a range of school settings, serving as principals in urban, suburban, and rural schools at varying school levels. Mentor participants all had at least 5 years of experience as a principal and had been serving as mentors in the program between 2 and 8 years (Table 3).

**Table 3. Participant Demographics**

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Years as Mentor
Principal A	M	2
Principal B	F	2
Principal C	F	4
Principal D	M	3
Principal E	M	3
Principal F	F	8

## Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through interviews in spring 2019. We used standard, semi-structured interview guides, including open-ended questions, to frame the interviews and probe for additional information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Educational leadership scholars with no relationship to the program under study reviewed the original interview guides to validate the alignment to our conceptual framework. Interview questions focused on mentorship, mentorship experiences, and techniques or strategies used in the internship. Each mentor was interviewed for sixty minutes to learn about their mentorship style and its potential connection to developmental readiness in leader development. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

## Data Analysis

We imported the transcripts into the Dedoose Qualitative Software package and applied deductive coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze our data. We used Boeijie’s (2002) framework for the constant comparison analysis, using two steps from his framework to fit our study's parameters. First we compared interview transcripts within a single



interview. In this step we asked questions such as “which codes are used to label categories in this particular interview?” (Boeije, 2002, p. 397). Secondly, we conducted comparison between interviews within the data set. In this step, we asked questions such as “[i]s interviewee A talking about the same category as B?” (Boeije, 2002, p. 398). Our analysis relied on four out of five constructs from Avolio and Hannah’s (2008) leader development framework.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, we used the four constructs and related recommendations for instruction (Tables 1 and 2) as deductive codes. Throughout the analysis, we periodically discussed ways to validate, compare, and extend our findings when appropriate using Glaser (1965) as guidance. To ensure the trustworthiness of interpretations, member-checking techniques were carried out as emerging themes developed and were shared with participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## **Findings**

Situating our findings within Avolio and Hannah’s (2008) “leader developer” framework, we found that mentor principals generally emphasized three of the underlying constructs: learning-goal orientation, developmental efficacy, and metacognitive ability. We also learned that mentors relied more heavily on constructs they themselves embraced as school leaders. For example, mentor principals gave their mentees learning experiences in tasks and activities that they found essential in leading a school. We present and discuss the findings by construct below.

### **Learning-goal Orientation**

According to Avolio and Hannah (2008), mentors engage in a learning goal orientation through their mentorship by creating tasks focused on their mentees achieving a certain performance standard while developing their leadership capacity. This provides aspiring leaders with a clear focus of the task goals and how to achieve a desired outcome. As a result, these principals engaged their mentees in goal-setting activities for the specific aim of school improvement. The six mentor principals in the study all described goal setting as critical in the development of aspiring principals in their responses, revealing the importance of goal setting. This finding was interesting because participants were not directly asked about goal setting, yet they named it explicitly across all interviews. First, the mentors viewed a learning-goal orientation as a critical skill in their leadership for school strategic planning and improvement. They described in detail how as principals they set, monitor, and adjust goals as the year progresses. Relating their viewpoint to their internship, the mentors described the several ways in which they exposed their mentees to the goal-setting process.

Through vicarious learning experiences, Mentor F provided contextualized experiences around a particular goal for his mentee to attain during their mentorship, similar to the recommendations for leader development by Avolio and Hannah (2008). Comments such as this were frequent across participants and reflected their beliefs that creating tasks with set goals was of paramount importance in being a well-prepared principal. Most mentor principals in this study regarded learning-goal orientation as the singularly most effective way to facilitate school improvement. For example, Mentor F explained,

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<sup>3</sup> We excluded the self-complexity construct because it was measured through a specific assessment which the mentors did not have access to during their mentorship.

Our focus areas are big rocks, as we call them, and that's where we (mentor and mentee) started. So just how I would start with my school improvement planning, I showed my mentee where we were, where our data was at, what our goals were coming into this. And then, my mentee was able to be a part of where my planning was going forward. So, everything my mentee looked at this year was through that eye of school improvement so that my mentee could make the connections just like I'd want my mentee to do when they have their own school.

Participants also used various learning-goal heuristics and analogics to teach their mentees how to set goals. Some examples of these heuristics were “big rocks,” “entry plans,” and “theory of action,” to name a few. Mentors produced these learning tools on their own, relying on their own discretion and training, and were not prompted to by the administration preparation program. The program takes a hands-off approach with their mentors.

Another way mentors incorporated a learning-goal orientation was through conversations with their mentees about the goals their mentees wanted to achieve but were not yet able to. For example, Mentor A shared about their mentee,

[H]e wants to improve on his goals. So, for this year, one of his goals was special education. He doesn't feel he has great access to that within his school district. He doesn't really understand the role of the principal in those meetings, so I've had him come in with that.

Similarly, Mentor B stressed the importance that given their mentee spends more time in their home school, the mentor felt it was important to develop learning goals aligned to the characteristics of their internship schools and their home schools. Mentor B explained,

It's important that I think for a mentee to identify what are the things that they feel like they're not getting in their home school and sort of develop their own level of planning. It's important for them to recognize what do I feel confident with and what are the areas that I want to improve with.

Half of the participants in this sample described developing learning goals around areas of improvement that could work in both the home and internship schools. In this way, a learning goal orientation can operate in different settings, developing a leader's capacity to create goals regardless of the setting. This allows mentees multiple opportunities to develop their learning goal capacity across settings.

All principals in our study described how preparing aspiring leaders to be knowledgeable and skilled through goal-oriented tasks, influenced their *own* goal setting for the school they led. For example, Mentor E explained, “Some of it's [mentorship activities] driven by the timeline of the school year. I must set up my own professional learning goals or theory of action, and I share that with them. What am I doing, and why?” Thus, we discovered the mentorship in these cases encouraged reciprocal learning – mutually beneficial to both parties (Young et al., 2005).

## **Developmental Efficacy**

In our study, the mentors were acutely aware that their mentorship provided experiences to develop the aspiring leaders' skills to become a knowledgeable and well-prepared leader. Avolio and Hannah (2008) described developmental efficacy as representative of a leader's "level of confidence that they can develop a specific ability or skill for employment in a specific context or leader role" (p. 337). Four of the six mentors described how they evaluated and factored in their mentees' developmental readiness for learning specific leadership competencies. For some principals, developing the practical leadership skills was the sole purpose of their mentorship. For example, Mentor F shared, "I need to give [the student] the tools to be effective and the skill set that people have to have to be successful in this line of work." Mentor C stated they felt the program didn't offer leadership skills as much as "organizational, and research, and presentation skills," resulting in their mentorship attempting to demonstrate how to tap into a leader's intuition. Mentor E described the leadership skills he focuses on to build confidence in his mentees and to develop their "common sense, the ability to see the big picture, the ability to view situations through different eyes, the ability to listen and have patience, and all those good things; have grit." These four principals narrate their awareness of developmental efficacy in their mentorship practices, despite not labeling it as such.

At the same time, in four interviews, principals reported their confusion with and irreverence for the notion of developmental readiness. For example, Mentor E viewed efficacy as related to discrete skills rather than applied to leadership in general. He argued, "I think readiness in terms of pedagogy. I think readiness in terms of dealing with families and different sort of things that come up that get in the way of learning, more gray area things." The data suggest that some mentors saw readiness as it related to discrete skills, and not as an overall orientation toward leadership development. Other mentors viewed leadership readiness differently. For example, Mentor A noted:

Yeah. ... I think in some ways they're ready in different areas of leadership before others. I also think that there's a lot you learn on the job, that you've got to live it, and the more experiences you have, the more you can try and see how would I respond to this? Learn from your mistakes. [Reflect on] [t]his didn't go well, so what am I going to do differently?

The sentiments above show how our sample of mentors considered developmental efficacy in several ways. Most important, however, was the strong emphasis mentors seemed to place on readiness to learn. For example, for some mentors in this sample, choosing to take on a mentee came down to how ready they were to learn the role of principal. Mentor E shared how he considered developmental readiness when being asked to take on a new and challenging candidate.

I kind of had the option at that point of saying, "Yeah, I'll take him on or no, I won't." It's like, "Yeah, I'll absolutely take this guy on." There was so much potential there. But I could see what the concerns were. He certainly wasn't ready to be a principal at that point. I advised him I wasn't even sure he was ready at the end. I mean he made a lot of

growth and I think he's going to be a wonderful administrator. But I wasn't sure that he had enough other kinds of experience to pull from to jump into that role yet.

In some manner or another, all mentors highlighted the importance of considering or gauging the developmental efficacy of their interns without explicitly referring to it by name.

Avolio and Hannah's (2008; 2009) conceptualization of developmental readiness centers on discrete skills and dispositions of the leader. This construct is characterized by the development of leadership skills such as strategic planning and decision-making. Our data reflected developmental readiness as far as mentors described preparing leaders through a developmental lens. This finding suggests successful mentors attend to developmental readiness in the clinical preparation of aspiring school leaders. We acknowledge it is also highly plausible that principal mentors made decisions on what was best for their mentee based on their own leadership experiences. In other words, their assessment of the mentee's development readiness may not be the only guiding factor in helping shape the mentorship – their actions are inextricably linked to their personal leadership experiences.

### **Metacognitive Ability**

All mentor principals in our study expressed an understanding of the importance of their intern's own awareness of learning via metacognitive ability. In our interviews, there were numerous references to the importance of reflection and related meta-awareness activities. In fact, all principals within our study described ways that they develop metacognitive ability in their mentorship. Moreover, we found that the principals in this study found developing metacognitive ability to be the most essential element to help aspiring leaders build their leadership capacity.

Metacognitive ability is a leader's ability to think about their own thinking – being keenly aware of their own cognitive processes, self-regulation, and cognitive ability to pursue a task (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). All principals referred to building their mentee's metacognitive ability, starting – but not ending – with the simple act of reflection. For example, Mentor D described how she begins this process of developing metacognitive ability: “I'm jam-packing the schedule with every possible opportunity for you to see or do something. It lends itself to opportunities for reflection each time that we're together.” Mentor A explained,

Of particular interest is the reflection on the thought process going into a situation or a meeting or whatever it is and then the reflection and I think it's trying to get inside my head. I try to keep saying that, please always be thinking, what would you do differently knowing yourself?

This characterization of the process of developing metacognitive ability offers how principals connect what they are doing with how they will pursue the task given what the mentee knows about themselves.

Moreover, this study's findings indicate that principals advance their mentee's metacognitive ability by being purposeful in their set up of activity and then spending reflecting time after an activity. Five out of the six principals in this study conducted reflection activities with guided

prompts, similar to those advanced by Avolio and Hannah (2008). For example, Mentor A continued,

We don't want a clone out there. It just doesn't work. So, I mean, I've tried to come at that [developing metacognition] from those two angles and meet in the middle. I think the big piece is I keep saying, "What did you think about that? What would you have done differently? What do you think was the right thing?"

Also, there was a sense that expanding their mentee's developmental readiness could only happen when they built reflection into their daily practice. As Principal L noted about a mentee, "He knew he had to reflect and change the way he was approaching things to be successful, and he did it."

Another way the element of metacognitive ability came up was when some mentors shared how critical events during the internship prompted reflection and facilitated discussions. Mentor C explained how his mentee demonstrated metacognitive ability by asking "why?" when events occurred.

When we have, I'll call, major events, she [the mentee] gives space [to me while handling the event] and then comes back and says, "Can we talk about this?" And asks, "Why did you do this as opposed to that?" You know, you must have faced opposition here and what are you thinking? Then we have that conversation, so I can't take credit for all that, but she does ask. I think she is pretty perceptive too in that when I'm in the moment, she sort of gives me the space to do that and in return we'll talk about it. So, she's very interested in the why's. Why did you do this? Why didn't you do that? I think she's becoming much more aware of the different variables.

This mentor illustrates how some mentees come into their mentoring with the understanding of how reflection can uncover nuances of leadership. Thus, we found that the reciprocity of the metacognitive ability for mentors provides them with increased reflection to lead better and stronger. Mentor C continued "I think it makes you be a teacher and so as opposed to just going along and doing your own thing, I mean, we're reflective as a group." The findings describe the importance of considering the metacognitive ability of mentees.

## **Discussion and Implications**

As a practice of preparing school leaders, mentoring in three learning domains – learning-oriented goal setting, developmental efficacy, and metacognitive ability – emerged as important components for the mentor in preparing knowledgeable and skilled aspiring leaders. Our study examined how a sample of successful mentor principals go about their work in developing aspiring school leaders in the context of a university principal preparation program's internship. Field-based experiences offer tremendous learning opportunities for students. But not all internship experiences are the same, and their success depends on the mentor principal's ability to develop their student. Our interest in this study was learning how successful mentors approached their task of facilitating an internship. In particular, we were interested in the extent to which mentors considered the developmental readiness of their mentees as they mentor them.

We used Avolio and Hannah's (2008) leadership development constructs as a lens to analyze the mentorship practices of mentor principals.

Our findings resonate with existing scholarship that has reported the critical role mentorship plays in developing principals (Oplatka & Lapidot, 2018; Parylo et al., 2012; Zhang & Brundrett, 2010). Previous studies on mentoring aspiring leaders differentiated between mentorship types (formal and informal) and mentorship benefits (Kramer, 2010; Parylo, 2012). The mentors in our study developed aspiring principals in part based on their perceived readiness to learn or take on specific challenges. Mentor principals used developmental readiness as a key tenet of preparation despite being unaware of existing developmental readiness frameworks. Our finding suggests that principal preparation programs could benefit from providing their mentor principals a developmental readiness framework, such as that proffered by Avolio and Hannah (2008; 2009). Cohn and Sweeney (1992) offered this recommendation as a model for mentoring programs three decades ago; however, their approach did not accentuate developing aspiring principals to lead for school improvement. Further research is needed to inform the utility of developmental readiness frameworks for pre-service principal mentoring.

Our study suggests that mentorship of aspiring leaders provides the opportunity for mentors to concentrate on a few, targeted leadership skills pertinent to the development of aspiring school leaders. We believe that this approach assists in developing future leaders who will stay in a principal position because they are well prepared. One of the themes from this study viewed mentoring as encouraging metacognition or developing aspiring principals' ability to reflect on their learning and practice. Our findings align to the conclusions of relevant scholarly literature that mentorship involves collaboration, peer support and mutual learning to be effective (Bush & Coleman, 1995; Young et al., 2005). Our findings have important implications for leadership development in school administrator preparation programs, aspiring school leader mentors, and state policies on administrator licensure programs. We speak to three specific implications below.

### **Accentuate the Role of Mentors**

Not unlike many other administrator preparation programs, the program serving as the context for our study had built a pool of mentors with which to assign their candidates. Programs identify mentors based on a variety of reasons – they may be alumni, have good reputations as leaders, seasoned, or simply they were available and willing to serve. We were struck by the small number of “effective” mentors identified by our nomination method; of the pool of roughly 50 mentors, only six met our narrow nomination criteria. These were, theoretically, the best of the best. Based on what we learned from these deemed-effective mentors, it may behoove other programs to conduct their own inquiries with their mentors. We suggest that preparation programs learn how their own mentors conduct the work of the internship and their underlying rationales for those practices. Programs could then determine if the approach of mentors aligns with other aspects of the preparation program.

We also suggest programs emphasize the possible benefit to mentors given evidence on the mutually beneficial nature of such partnerships. Consistent with Spillane et al. (2000), we

learned that, to some degree, the act of mentoring had impacts on the mentors and how they operated as school leaders.

### **Using a Common Framework for Developing Leaders**

The principals in this study described a lack of closely coupled mentorship practices to other components of the university administrator preparation program. Namely, the mentors felt there was not an explicit connection between mentorship activities from the university preparation program and the curriculum their mentees were learning. We contend that school administrator preparation programs should tend to all these components while maintaining coherence to the program curricula. However, they could anchor their program to the Avolio and Hannah (2008, 2009) framework as a way to focus the internship. Avolio and Hannah's leader developer framework consists of a self-complexity assessment. We believe it would be helpful to give aspiring school leaders such an assessment before they start the program, at an intermediate point during the program, and then upon completion. Gathering these data allows for measurable goals to be determined and some data to be given to mentor principals, further accelerating their ability to mentor their mentees.

We also encourage programs to create training modules for their mentors. These modules could include specific activities based on the leader developer framework (Avolio & Hannah, 2008, 2009; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). The modules do not have to be linear, instead offered as a menu for the mentors to use as authentic situations arise. This would also help give a common language, goals, and learning experiences for the program.

### **Recommended Activities to Infuse the Leader Development Framework in Principal Preparation Programs**

The data presented in this study suggests that direct actions and activities could be included in order to support the development of aspiring principals. Principal preparation programs train aspiring leaders in many ways. Thus, principal preparation programs should provide activities in which aspiring leaders set goals, create criteria for success that describes what meeting the goal looks like and provide a regular feedback loop to reflect on their leadership efficacy in meeting the goal. Additionally, principal preparation programs should align specific activities that are already embedded in their programs to the leader developer framework to assess how aspiring leaders are developing their capacity. We recommend that principal preparation programs train mentors in the leader developer framework to ensure a closely tethered internship experience which may result in preparing highly effective leaders.

### **Limitations of the Study**

We acknowledge the imperfect nature of the selection process to identify what we call "effective" mentors. We would have preferred to ground identification of "effective" mentors using other forms of data, such as job placement rates and systematic evaluations of mentors; however, we did not have access to these data or they were not consistently collected at the time of our study. Furthermore, the challenges of executing our study during a pandemic made access to our entire target population of successful mentors limited. Nonetheless, we were able to

identify mentors who received strong endorsements from an informed set of nominators. Another limitation of our study design was that we relied on one source of data – participant interview. The research warrant would have been strengthened by including some triangulation of evidence from other sources. Finally, this study was also limited by the number of participants, therefore potentially making the findings inappropriate for generalizing across various contexts.

### **Conclusion**

The internship offers significant learning opportunities in principal preparation programs. Research on mentoring in the context of pre-service leadership preparation has generally emphasized the importance of setting clear learning goals for aspiring leaders. This study examined the mentorship of principals nominated because of their exemplar mentorship practices and how, if at all, their mentorship practices considered the developmental readiness of their mentees. Our findings indicate that a sample of mentors nominated as effective take into account the developmental readiness of their students. Further, mentors actively facilitated the mentorship through the specific lens of preparing aspiring principals to lead for school improvement. Recruitment, induction, and support of principals are all impacted by mentoring. Practitioners may learn from this study how they can improve their mentoring practices with aspiring leaders, new teachers, or other mentor/mentee relationships. Administrator preparation programs can also think strategically about how mentoring aligns with their program curriculum.



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