Principles of Coaching for Coaching of Principals: A Self-Directed Approach

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Principles of Coaching for Coaching of Principals:

A Self-Directed Approach

Suzanne M. Kimball

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

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Research on school districts has repeatedly found that focusing on student learning and instructional leadership is a key component to effectiveness (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Leithwood, 2010; Anderson & Young, 2018). Districts are currently undergoing a redefinition of roles in order to specifically support principals as instructional leaders in their schools. This qualitative case study describes how one district began to develop a system for supporting principals through incorporating leadership coaching. This study shares the perspectives of principal supervisors and other district specialists as they built their own capacities to be effective coaches. The complexity of simultaneously developing skills in both the principal supervisors learning to coach and the principals being coached is contextualized in this study. I find that the self-direction of coaches learning to coach was significant in principal supervisors and district specialists learning to understand the key principles of coaching. As individuals and as a collective of district leaders, it is the element of choice that creates a meaningful beginning to implementing leadership coaching for principals and has set forth a clear vision for the future of supporting principals in their instructional leadership goals.

Keywords: instructional leadership, principal supervisors, principals, coaching
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DESCRIPTION OF DISSERTATION STRUCTURE AND CONTENT</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Professional Development</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults as Learners</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Relationships</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach Positioning</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding and Analysis</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusting Relationships, Safe Environments, and Vulnerability</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusting Relationships</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Environments</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Dyads</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Goals</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Support in Coaching</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Directed Professional Development</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and Implications</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Directed Professional Development</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Change to Support Principals</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A Review of Literature</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Leadership</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Principal Instructional Leaders</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Principal Supervisors as Leaders</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Learners</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Research</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Trusting Relationships</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying Adult Learning Theory</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Language</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development Research</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Support Structures</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Supervisor as Evaluator and Coach</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widening District Office Support Structures</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realignment of Duties</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pipelines</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: Extended Methodology</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding and Analysis</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX D: Consent Form</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX E: Interview Instrument</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1  Summary of Findings in Relation to the Professional Development Framework ..... 37
Table A1  A Sample Comparison of Coaching Models .............................................................. 66
Table B2  Bivariate Analysis of Themes..................................................................................... 91
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1  Conceptual Model for “Principles of Coaching for Coaching of Principals” .......... 5

Figure 2  Conceptual Coaching Model ...................................................................................... 15

Figure 3  The Relationships Between Trusting Relationships, Coach and Coachee Vulnerability, and Safe Environments ................................................................. 16

Figure 4  Skills of Coaching Goals of Principal Supervisors and District Specialists .......... 31

Figure 5  Revised Model for “Principles of Coaching for Coaching of Principals” .......... 43

Figure B1  Triple Venn Diagram of Conceptualized Themes .......................................................... 90
DESCRIPTION OF DISSERTATION STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The hybrid dissertation format is one of several options supported in Brigham Young University’s McKay School of Education. Unlike a traditional “five-chapter” format, the hybrid dissertation focuses on producing a journal-ready manuscript. Consequently, the final dissertation product has no chapters and instead focuses on the presentation of a scholarly manuscript as the centerpiece. Following the manuscript are the manuscript’s reference section and appendices, including an extended review of literature, an extended methodology section, documentation from the institutional review board, a copy of the consent form given to participants, and the interview instrument used in the study.

The targeted journal for this article is the *Journal of Educational Administration* (JEA). The JEA is published by Emerald Publishing and is an international journal founded in 1963. Articles are peer-reviewed and require a manuscript length of 4000 to 8000 words for submission. The target audience for this journal is intended for both academics and practitioners of educational leadership and has a primary focus on literature related to leadership and management of K-12 schools and school systems.
Introduction

The leadership exhibited in schools and districts makes a difference in student outcomes. Leithwood et al. (2004) identified three basic practices successful leaders use most often: (a) setting a direction for the organization, (b) developing people through training, and (c) focusing the entire organization on supporting teaching and learning. Influenced by this earlier research and narrowed to the role of the principal, Grissom et al. (2021) synthesized two decades of research in this area in a recent report entitled “How Principals Affect Students and Schools.” Grissom et al. state,

Across six rigorous studies estimating principals’ effects using panel data, principals’ contributions to student achievement were nearly as large as the average effects of teachers identified in similar studies. Principals’ effects, however, are larger in scope because they are averaged over all students in a school, rather than a classroom. (2021, p. xiv)

In other words, leaders influence the entire educational organization. With this understanding, it is necessary that organizations make a concerted effort to develop the skills necessary for principals to become the skilled instructional leaders needed to improve student achievement in schools.

What does it mean to have an effective district that supports principals? In a study of 12 effective school districts, Murphy and Hallinger (1988) uncovered how the leaders of effective districts, similar to those of effective schools, take on an instructional and curricular focus, including strong instructional leadership from the superintendent. Leithwood (2010) found similar characteristics when leaders take a district-wide focus on student learning and invest in instructional leadership, including district-wide, job-embedded professional development
(Leithwood, 2010). Influenced by these two seminal works, Anderson and Young (2018) conducted an exploratory research review and developed a district effectiveness framework. This framework consisted of three domains: (a) developing and delivering a higher quality education specifically focused on student learning, (b) structuring and managing the organization and its resources, (c) and supporting and leading people in schools and districts (Anderson & Young, 2018). Without question, Anderson and Young, along with others (Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Honig et al., 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008), have reported on how district leaders strengthen their organization by focusing on student learning and developing the individuals in their organization.

Although we understand what leaders of effective districts focus on, far less research is available on how districts go about becoming effective districts. District leadership structures typically direct their attention to fiscal or policy compliance and decisions. Because of the increasing demands on principals to be instructional leaders, a redefinition of district-level support structures is evolving, and district leaders are now grappling with how their organizations can better support their principals. Principal supervisors generally have had the primary responsibility of managing a number of principals and schools at one time. Currently, the role of the principal supervisor is undergoing a redirection toward supervising student learning. In the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2015), the shifting role of principal supervisors is described as

Traditionally, principal supervisors have focused on ensuring that school leaders, and the buildings they run, complied with local policies and state regulations. Now that job description is under review. Recent research suggests that principal supervisors can positively affect student results by helping principals grow as instructional leaders. With
the right training and support, they can assess and evaluate principals’ current leadership practices and identify professional learning opportunities most likely to lead to improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and achievement. Moreover, they can ensure that principals’ work and vision align with district goals, and that the central office effectively supports school leaders, schools and student success. (p. 2)

Along with the *Model Principal Supervisor Standards* (CCSSO, 2015) and the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015), the Wallace Foundation, in a series of three reports, has set out to redefine the role of the principal supervisor with their Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI). In their standards documents, the CCSSO, NPBEA, and in the PSI reports from the Wallace Foundation, place student learning at the center of a principal supervisor's role with teacher and classroom instruction as their primary focus. Principals, therefore, become the direct support for teachers, with principal supervisors supporting principals. The authors of the PSI reports, redefine the role of the principal supervisor as being the instructional leader with the goal of improving principal effectiveness (Goldring, Clark et al., 2020; Goldring et al., 2018; Goldring, Rogers, & Clark, 2020; Saltzman, 2016). The framework presented in those reports consists of five core components:

- revising the principal supervisor job description to focus on instructional leadership;
- reducing principal supervisors’ span of control (the number of principals they oversee);
- training supervisors and develop their capacity to support principals;
- developing systems to identify and train new supervisors; and,
strengthening central office structures to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisor role (Goldring et al., 2018, p. 3)

It is these primary documents that districts are using to rethink their organizational structure, the duties assigned to specific roles, and how, in general, they can change a managing system into one that focuses more specifically on student learning. In the PSI documents, Goldring et al. (2018) suggest that changes in central office structures are necessary for this shift in focus to happen, as one district’s revised job description reveals:

The supervision, support, and coaching of principals is the primary responsibility of [a principal supervisor] . . . The work of the [principal supervisor] will be coaching based, whereby principals are coached toward effectiveness through clear expectation setting, quality communication, and feedback based on a foundation of trust. (Goldring et al., 2018, p. A-3)

Although standards and models exist, we still do not know enough about how district leaders incorporate these ideals into their own contexts. We do not know how principal supervisors move into an instructional leader role in order to support principals in their instructional leader roles. The purpose of this study is to learn from the efforts of leaders in one district on their journey to support principals through coaching. The conceptual model of coaching principals is illustrated in Figure 1.
On the far end of Figure 1, the teacher has the support of both the principal and instructional coach for ongoing professional development. The principal, likewise, has the principal supervisor as a direct support person; however, principal supervisors, in order to provide meaningful support to principals, need their own professional development opportunities. District leaders have explored using external coaches, professional learning communities, and numerous other professional learning avenues to provide this development. In this case study, the district leaders provide this individualized support to principals through internal coaching. This qualitative case study will look at how the leaders in one district began to develop their own system for supporting principals through coaching and identifies the professional development experiences most valued by their coaches. The following questions guide this study:

1. What aspects of implementing leadership coaching did principal supervisors, other district specialist coaches, and principals find meaningful?
2. What did principal supervisors and district specialist coaches learn from their first year of coaching principals?

The complexity of simultaneously developing skills in both principals and principal supervisors is contextualized in this study.

**Background**

**Effective Professional Development**

Leaders of school districts can use the research done on teacher professional development and apply it to district leadership professional development. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), on behalf of the Learning Policy Institute, set out to determine what effective professional development looked like. To do this, they analyzed 35 studies that met their criteria from the previous three decades of research and coded them to uncover the elements of effective professional development. In their study, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) set forth a framework to evaluate effective practices. From their research, they identified seven traits used by school and district leaders as they planned for a more meaningful learning experience for their teachers—namely, (a) being content-focused on specific curriculum or pedagogy development, (b) participants learning through active engagement that mimics student engagement for learning, (c) collaboration among participants for the sharing of ideas, (d) the use of models and modeling of instruction, (e) the utilization of a coach for expert support, (f) time for participants to reflect and receive feedback, and (g) commitment to the time needed to practice and implement new learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Although their work focused on teachers, due to its grounding in adult learning theory (Knowles, 1975), Darling-Hammond et al.’s framework can easily be applied to school and district leaders. As district leaders struggle to
find ways to shift focus through changes in the behaviors of leaders, this framework gives them a lens with which to evaluate districts’ plans.

**Adults as Learners**

Understanding adults as learners is a necessary base for any professional learning. In *The Adult Learner*, Knowles (1975) first puts forth the idea of adult learning theory wherein adults need to be self-directed with the support of a facilitator who is mindful of the learner’s context (Knowles, 1975, 1989). Specifically, it is most effective if adults are given the autonomy to make their own professional goals either for themselves or their organization. However, in a study done by Zepeda et al. (2014) nearly 40 years after Knowles’ seminal publication, they found that although principal professional development focused on goals and problems, it still rarely considered the relevance to the individual. Traditional professional development, such as conferences and workshops, is typically designed for groups and would be less likely to address an individual’s personal goals.

Coaching, on the other hand, is typically a one-on-one experience whereby the learner is given a greater degree of choice. The utilization of a coach is a key component of the Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) professional development framework. The beginning of coaching research, like the professional development framework, began with studying teachers. Joyce and Showers’ (1988) seminal study spotlighted the effectiveness of peer-to-peer coaching in conjunction with other methods of professional development. They found a minimal transfer of skills when participants were only taught theory, when theory was taught with an added demonstration of the theory, and even when participants practiced the skills of the theory; however, when personal coaching was included, 95% of the teachers were able to transfer the skill into their classroom practice.
Subsequently, research on coaching teachers has expanded to include a focus on the principal. Researchers have studied transformational coaching (Aguilar, 2017), cognitive coaching (Rogers et al., 2016), and leadership coaching (Warren & Kelsen, 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011), to name a few. Coaching gurus such as Bloom et al. (2005), Kee et al. (2010), Knight (2018), Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018), along with others, all identify similar elements in their coaching models—namely, (a) developing relationships of professional trust, (b) utilizing coaching communication skills like listening and questioning, and (c) employing coaching positions rather than advice. Furthermore, the research on strategies used to coach principals toward the goal of student achievement is key to the literature (Huff et al., 2013; Warren & Kelsen, 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011). Overall, coaching model characteristics not only align with adult learning theory but also support the details behind effective professional development that district leaders can use to develop their own systems of support for principals.

**Developing Relationships**

The cornerstone of coaching is relationships. Coaching is most often between two people and is most effective if a safe place is developed for open dialogue and reflection. One of the earliest to study principal development through coaching, Bloom et al. (2005) states that,

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

The authors also emphasize that trust is “consciously and consistently nurtured” (p. 27). Since Bloom et al. (2005), coaching experts have developed competencies that have helped coaches understand how to better develop trusting relationships with coachees. Knight (2018) couches his
instructional coaching model within his identified seven partnership principles—equity, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity. In other words, the coach and the coachee develop a “partnership” where learning can happen. They explain:

When coaches act in ways that are consistent with the Partnership Principles, as opposed to a top-down approach, [coachees] do most of the thinking, and coaches and [coachees] work as equals with the goal of making a powerful, positive difference in children’s lives. (Knight, 2018, p. 4)

Knight would argue that coaching adults while adhering to these partnership principles results in relationships built on trust and adherence to the learner’s own goals. Aguilar’s (2017) transformational coaching model focuses on exploring the behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being, which unveil the reality behind actions and thoughts. Without developing a trusting relationship, these conversations would not exhibit the vulnerability needed to analyze data and uncover thinking needed for growth. In summary, the National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching (Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education [CUREE], 2010) describes coaching as “developing trust, attending respectfully and with sensitivity to the powerful emotions involved in deep professional learning” (p. 2).

**Coach Positioning**

Coach positioning is an intentional skill by the coach to identify the supports that a coachee needs. Bloom et al. (2005) describes the art of moving between facilitative and instructional approaches like a Mobius strip whereby there is fluidity between “ways of being” and “ways of doing” as a coach employs consulting, collaborative, and transformational approaches. In other words, the coach could “consult” when the coachee does not have enough skill or knowledge to decide for themselves and then take a “transformational” approach.
whereby the coachee is the sole architect of the decisions. Knight (2018) uses the terms facilitative (sounding board), directive (expert-apprentice), and dialogical (partner) to explain the different coaching positions. Overall, effective coaches work to keep the coachee in the driver’s seat of their own learning by allowing thinking to happen rather than fixing or solving the coachee’s problem for them.

Expanding from formalized coaching sessions, Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018) describe the “coaching approach” as “intentionally utilizing some of the transferable elements of formal coaching in a range of conversational situations that would not typically be considered coaching interactions” (p. 18). They suggest that leadership coaching does not always occur in a formal one-on-one coaching conversation but that it can also occur in other settings such as in groups or when spontaneous questions are asked. Because of this, the coach should be mindful of the potential for coaching at all times. Overall, coaching experts make it clear that coaching takes on different forms, from facilitating thinking through questioning and reflection to a more prescriptive, consultative type of coaching. The coach’s role is to know when to utilize each approach as needed.

Methods

This is a qualitative case study of a large, urban/suburban district in the state of Utah and the district leaders who are pursuing the implementation of coaching in order to support their principals. Research on coaching training at upper district levels is lacking; therefore, preliminary research such as this study is not meant to generalize but instead to inform readers by taking the methodological approach of reporting the lived experience of leaders and others in one district.
By way of background, leaders in this district, including the superintendent and cabinet members, about a year before the study, began reading about and discussed leadership coaching and how it might look if it was done in their district. They read *Results Coaching* (Kee et al., 2010) and the PSI report from the Wallace Foundation (Goldring et al., 2018), which sparked their interest in leadership coaching. In their view, researchers had made a compelling argument that coaching should be a priority. From this year of study and discussion, the three secondary principal supervisors and six district-level specialists became actively engaged in organizing themselves as coaches for their principals. The secondary principal supervisors debated the idea of pairing themselves with district specialists and ultimately felt principals would benefit from a wider support system rather than a rigid assignment of coaches. The result was the development of coaching dyads and sometimes triads.

**Participants**

Convenience sampling was utilized for this study. Participant coaches included three secondary principal supervisors and six district specialists. Participant coachees included six junior high principals selected by the principal supervisors who oversee them. Principal supervisors made these selections based on individual criteria that consisted of how much time would be necessary to coach the principal, whether the principal was “coachable,” the relationship the principal supervisor had with the principal, and/or the principal having a vision for learning. All participants were white and between 40 to 65 in age. Furthermore, all were male except for one female district specialist.

**Data Collection**

I conducted semi-structured interviews at the beginning and end of the study, which spanned one school year. The first interview, which was conducted before coaching began, was
intended to uncover the individual coaching experience as well as what individuals hoped to gain from implementing coaching, both as a coach and as the coachee. Informed by the research questions, I designed two interview instruments, one for the pre-interview and one for the post-interview. I also designed the separate interview questions for coaches and principals (see Appendix E). The main categories of questions included general coaching experience, relationships, professional development experience, next steps in coaching implementation, and future goals. Initial interviews were between 15-20 minutes and included 8 questions, while final interviews were between 30-45 minutes and included around 14 questions. Because of the semi-structured nature of these interviews, responses led to follow up questions and opportunities for participants to elaborate on their experiences. Interviews were conducted individually over a recorded Zoom session (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2021). Simultaneously, I used the Otter app (Otter.ai, 2021) to record and transcribe the interviews.

Coding and Analysis

All interviews were uploaded to the NVivo 12 qualitative data platform (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). Each file was organized by timing of the interview (pre or post) as well as by job description (principal supervisor, district specialist, and principal), which served as the only attribute coding since all participants except one were similar in age, racial background, and gender. I used both deductive and inductive coding approaches for the initial coding. Deductive provisional codes included the seven characteristics of the professional learning framework (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) and the generally accepted coaching principles (Bloom et al., 2005; Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Kee et al., 2010; Knight, 2018). Inductive, open coding was then used to specifically capture the participant’s voice to uncover their perceptions more fully.
Subsequent coding helped to identify trends in the data. Second coding included the reclassification of nodes and child nodes in terms of focused coding. I utilized the results of this part of the coding process to determine what major themes and subthemes or categories were present among the participants’ responses. During the expansion of codes, I performed a deeper analysis and defined themes more accurately. Nodes were then combined or collapsed as necessary. Axial coding was used to discover relationships. I then ran queries to determine if the three groups valued or referred more to one theme over another. Queries were used also to determine if relationships existed among nodes and themes by pairing various bivariates. Both primary and secondary themes were used. For instance, the major theme of goals was paired with the type of speaker as well as with the other themes of future support and relationships.

I uncovered significant findings by first analyzing how often participants referred to the separate themes. This analysis was also sorted by participant group to determine if one group was more likely to identify with a particular node or category than another. In most cases, I found no discrepancies; therefore, I combined the response frequencies of each group. A percentage was then calculated based on the number of participants who contributed to the theme. Primary findings had a natural threshold of 85–100%, which represented eight out of the nine coaches, five out of the six principals, or 14 out of the 16 total participants. Similarly, secondary findings were between 65–84% within the same three groupings. Findings and analysis processes were charted using Google Sheets (Google, n.d.).

Validity

Internal validity for this study was accounted for through triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement, peer review, and reflexivity, as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Triangulation occurred by interviewing each of the different participant perspectives of the study
focus—principal supervisors, district specialists, and principals. In all, 16 individuals were interviewed twice, allowing post-interview questions to be built upon previous answers in order to more deeply understand their experience. Participation in the study was based on all those who were engaged in coaching principals and the principals that coaches selected to be coached. For this reason, there was not a limiting or sampling of the population but instead was all-inclusive. Member checks were conducted with four participants throughout the study, which aided in contextualizing their journey. In the last member check meeting, the conceptual coaching model was discussed, as were the findings of the study.

Because of my own understanding of coaching and professional learning research as well as my experience with coaching and training coaches, I, as a researcher, was cognizant of the influence I might have on the gathering of data and the subsequent findings of the study. Consequently, I worked to intentionally maintain objectivity while coding the interviews, being sure to be true to the speaker’s intentions in order to not conflate nor underrepresent the participants’ experience by interpreting or making a value judgment prematurely.

Findings

In this study, I primarily set out to determine what aspects of coaching were perceived as meaningful. Primary findings fell into the four main categories: (a) trusting relationships, (b) the value of coaching dyads, (c) a focus on goals, and (d) support of coaching through the organization’s structure. Ultimately, the overall finding of choice as a result of self-directed professional learning became the foundation for each of these other areas. Figure 2 visually represents the relationship between these categories.
The words of those interviewed are used as evidence in the findings. In referencing the speaker, the following codes are used:

- PS for principal supervisor,
- DS for district specialist, and
- P for principal.

Each code is then followed by a number, to differentiate each participant. For instance, DS-1 through DS-6 in the reference indicates one of the six district specialists speaking as well as which interview (e.g., Int. 1 or Int. 2).

**Trusting Relationships, Safe Environments, and Vulnerability**

Through selective coding, nuances of trust, safety, and vulnerability were identified. Overall, trust and relationships were most often paired together by the interviewees. Likewise, “safe” was used to describe coaching environments. Vulnerability was used to describe the skill
needed to be coached by both the coaches and the principal, as well as the skill needed to coach—specifically stated by coaches while learning to coach. This reciprocal relationship between coach and coachee is indicative of the definitions surrounding these three words (trusting relationship, safe environment, and vulnerability) are not one-sided but a result of the interactions between individuals. One district specialist expressed this by calling it a “horizontal relationship” (DS-3, Int. 2). Figure 3 visually describes these connections.

**Figure 3**

*The Relationships Between Trusting Relationships, Coach and Coachee Vulnerability, and Safe Environments*

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**Trusting Relationships**

“Trust is a big thing. And so I think you have to develop trust first” (PS-1, Int. 2). This quote is an example of how participants recognized the importance and value of having and building trusting relationships. Although trusting relationships are an essential component of coaching, trust is not described the same by all groups. There were over 100 coded references for relationships of trust found in all 31 participant interviews. Principal supervisors generally were more focused on the development of trust on a personal level. One principal supervisor summarized trust in the context of the coaching dyad,
We have explored the idea of bringing different [district supervisors] instead of bringing the same person each time; we've explored bringing a different person because they all have a different point of view, but then we shied away from that because of the trust factor. It's hard to keep trust, you know. They may trust me, but if I'm always bringing somebody different. Is there going to be a trust level there. (PS-1, Int. 2)

Another spoke of their hope for how open principals would be and how they might express themselves to their supervisor when they said,

But what I would want is a relationship built on trust, so it could be an authentic conversation saying, ‘Okay, here's where I could use some help. If you do this to help out, that would be good. When you do this, you know, it makes me a little uneasy’ or those kinds of things. (PS-3, Int. 2)

On the other hand, for district specialists and principals, trust was described more often in a professional or expert capacity. District specialists talked about knowing these relationships were being established when principals reached out and asked them questions. One district specialist summarized this process by saying, “Sometimes it is based on if they continue to ask, you know, if they call for it. ‘Can we talk again? I need a little more discussion with you.’ I think that's progress” (DS-6, Int. 2). Talking specifically about coaching conversations, another district specialist explained, “[A principal] reached out and said, ‘I just need to do something different for my leadership team.’ So I went over there and I asked him questions” (DS-5, Int. 1). On the other hand, the two district specialists who had not been principals expressed concern as to their value as a coach. A district specialist said, “I've never been a principal here. And so, you know where I haven't done that, people may not trust me as much” (DS-4, Int. 2).
Similarly, principals described trust associated with someone who they knew could answer their questions. One principal stated,

Coaching is more of how do we talk through this with people who have the expertise to do these things to help me be better at my job without me trying to say I need to show that I'm doing a good job. It's more of—I just need to get better at what I'm doing and everybody's okay with that. (P-5, Int. 1)

Another principal said, “I just think it's nice to have someone who has the experience to answer, you know, difficult questions or situations that I guess that you trust that you can call them, they can give their perspective on things” (P-4, Int. 1). Perhaps confirming the concerns of the two district specialists who had not been a principal, four out of the seven principals interviewed expressed that they valued coaches who had been past principals. For example, a principal said, “I went to [a district specialist] because I know he had great teams that he put together when he was at [his school]” (P-1, Int. 2). Overall, where principal supervisors were more concerned in establishing a personal relationship built on trust, district specialists and principals valued expert knowledge more often.

Vulnerability

An aspect of trusting relationships was the idea of vulnerability. Every district specialist and two of the three principal supervisors talked about vulnerability in relation to both the coach and the coachee. A district specialist connected both these traits when they said, “I really feel like essential elements of great coaching is trust and vulnerability” (DS-4, Int. 1). Principal supervisors specifically worried about principals opening up. One stated,

I would imagine, I've never had any principal say this to me, but I would imagine there's a little bit of concern on their part of, okay, should I be vulnerable or not with my
supervisor because I need some help here. I know I never had anyone say that, but I would bet a few of them might have felt nervous to be vulnerable that way. (PS-2, Int. 2)

Speaking to this idea of vulnerability, every principal in the study, for their current situation, felt the ability to be honest and vulnerable with their principal supervisor. One stated, “I feel like I can tell him how it is—often sometimes a little too much probably. But no, I'm very honest and I don't feel like my job is in jeopardy or that they're judging me. It's truly a team effort” (P-6, Int. 2). Similarly, principals expressed that they could be vulnerable with their district specialists. Thinking of both coaches and themselves, one principal stated, “We're a pretty cohesive group. I think we can be very open with each other” and later continued, “the one thing about me is I'm not a proud individual in the sense that I'm more than fine to open up myself to my, my holes so to speak. And because I want some good feedback. I want some help” (P-3, Int. 2). Another principal expressed a similar sentiment by saying, “Coaching is more of how do we talk through this with people who have the expertise to do these things to help me be better at my job without me trying to say, ‘Hey, I need to show that I'm doing a good job.’ It's more of, ‘No, I just need to get better at what I'm doing’ and everybody's okay with that” (P-5, Int. 1).

Not only is it important for the principal to be vulnerable, but the coach also needs to be vulnerable. One principal supervisor described their own vulnerability when he said,

But there's a couple of [principals] that are maybe better than I have ever been at being a principal. And so I'm a little intimidated by that. But I think the thing that I keep telling myself when I go to those schools is, I can ask questions, I can listen and ask questions. I don't have to be better than them or perceived to be better or they can know that they're a
better principal than I am. But I can still listen to their concerns, ask questions, and, and
do some coaching. (PS-1, Int. 2)

This idea of leader vulnerability was also expressed by a district specialist who said, “Coaching
requires a vulnerability that requires, in my mind, more of a horizontal relationship than a
vertical relationship” (DS-3, Int. 1). Speaking of their own learning, another said, “It was when I
was in the process of being and having good dialogue with others [that] I saw my own holes as a
principal, and then you know I'm two years removed from being a being a principal and I
realized—oh, I wish I would have known that” (DS-2, Int. 2). This reflective vulnerability was
an important aspect of developing trusting relationships.

Safe Environments

Intentionally creating a safe environment falls primarily on the supervisor because of
their dual role as evaluator and coach. Evaluation and coaching conversations could be seen as
diametrically opposed unless the coach is intentionally aware of how they are communicating
with the principal. One district specialist describes this idea when stating,

I just think that's a dynamic that we want to be really mindful about and how we do that
the right way. Because in the coaching moments with that person, you don't want them to
feel like they're being evaluated or judged. You just want them to feel that they're
supported toward reaching their goal. (DS-1, Int. 1)

One communication technique was described as, “Don't ask why-questions because it kind of
makes some defensive. What, when, who questions clarify. Remember the power difference
between me and the principal and be very cognizant of that” (PS-1, Int. 2). It stands to reason
that those principal supervisors who worked to develop a professional, as well as a personal
relationship of trust with the principals they coached would be capable of both coaching and
evaluating. Overall, principal supervisors felt it was possible to coach and evaluate; however, one principal supervisor also felt it was contingent on the principal:

I think it depends on the principal truthfully. If it is a principal who is vulnerable, and trusts, and is confident, I think you're fine. But if it's a principal who might be a little weak, and is a little bit apprehensive, I think it would go the other way. So to me, it almost depends on—and my approach too—but I think a lot of it has to deal with the principals’ belief in themselves. (PS-2, Int. 2)

Similarly, district specialists, for the most part, believed a supervisor could coach and evaluate, but there was definite skepticism from a district specialist who stated,

It requires more of a horizontal relationship than a vertical relationship. It's very difficult, not impossible, but difficult enough that most of the time, it won't happen. It's very difficult to be vulnerable and say 'This is where I'm failing’ to somebody who's there to evaluate you. (DS-3, Int. 1)

Principals were also asked if they felt their principal supervisor could both coach and evaluate. Every principal in the study felt comfortable with their principal supervisors being in this dual role. One principal described,

I think the way that we handle the evaluations are very non-threatening. Like I don't feel that there's anything negative about the evaluations, and so I think that he can. Yes, I totally feel comfortable around [my supervisor] to where if he were to come in and say, ‘Hey this, this, this, you could do better’ I would consider that, you know, coaching rather than directives. And I think that's the nature of the culture of, I think, our whole district. . . I don't feel like I'm under a microscope, you know, that I'm worried that I'm going to misstep or that if I get a bad evaluation. You know I've never, ever felt like
when we've done the evaluations that potentially I would get dinged on this and that I would have to do some kind of corrective, punitive thing. (P-4, Int. 2)

Another principal’s view is that the evaluation was focused on different things:

I don't know that a formal evaluation really gets after some of the vision for learning and vision for the school stuff, near as much as, you know, how does a personnel, or how does the school feel about the culture of the school or you know some of those things. (P-2, Int. 2)

Although they felt that their current principal supervisors could effectively separate their roles as coaches and as evaluators, many of the participants also acknowledged that principals might not feel as comfortable having a coach who also evaluates them for the county system. One principal stated,

I feel comfortable with [my supervisor], that I can try to separate the two—of hey, I just need a coach right now versus hey I need, this is the evaluation time. I'm okay with that, but man is that it's a tricky situation, but I feel comfortable enough with him that I'm okay with it. (P-6, Int. 2)

Overall, a trusting relationship, including the aspects of establishing a safe environment, and the need for individuals to be vulnerable was spoken about by 94% of the participants in the study, which clearly indicates the importance of these relationships.

Coaching Dyads

In this study, principal supervisors and district specialists both coached principals within a coaching dyad or team of two coaches. Principal supervisors valued the addition of district specialists as co-coaches of principals, expanding the support base of principals while increasing
their own capacities as coaches. Each of the principal supervisors valued different aspects of this professional relationship:

I think the positive aspects of that is, while I'm talking [the district specialists] can be thinking and listening. And when [the district specialist] is talking, I can be thinking and listening. And when the principal is talking, we both can be thinking and listening. And that way we're seeing things. So instead of me telling them what to do, instead, I'm listening and exploring their thinking and [the district specialist] is doing the same and with his experience. . . The questions and the guidance and the coaching is richer. It's coming with more perspective. So that's why I think it's better because you're just adding another set of outside eyes to work with a principal. (PS-1, Int. 2)

The second principal supervisor valued what the district specialists brought to the conversation, namely data to base coaching conversations around. This principal supervisor observed,

They did a great job just presenting information, and let the schools decide, okay, what story is this data telling us. What are we learning from it? The curriculum folks weren't trying to say—here's your problem, here's your weakness. It was, here's some information. What do you guys see from this? What are you learning? What story is behind this? So it was a very nonthreatening opportunity to explore it. (PS-2, Int. 2)

The third principal supervisor valued the planning and debriefing as a coaching team when they said,

We realized it was nice for us to drive together. So on the way there, we’d talk. This is kind of our game plan. Then after the meeting on the way to the next school, we’d say, hey, how did that go? What do you think? What could we get better? And then we could take this from that school to this school. You know those are great ideas. (PS-3, Int. 2)
Each principal supervisor expressed a different professional trust example, yet all felt that the coaching team approach brought another dimension to the support of principals.

District specialists spoke of this professional relationship with positive surprise. Talking about how each supervisor had their own style, one particular principal supervisor said, “At first it was rocky because I think we all thought we knew what each other was thinking . . . then [the principal supervisor] turned to me and said, ‘Okay, how’s this thing going?’ and I was not ready for that, but we ran and it was okay and it all worked out.” (DS-3, Int. 2). Another said, You know what? I was surprised at how well things went. Just like any human relationship, there were times where I still felt a little bit more comfortable reaching out to [one principal supervisor more than another] . . . I felt like we were able to communicate pretty openly about what next steps might be with our small groups. I felt like we were a true team in facilitating those things. I never felt like it was me and [the other district specialist] going as a third wheel with [the principal supervisor] running that meeting. I felt like we were equal partners. (DS-2, Int. 2)

Overall, all of the coaches valued the team relationship as they worked to support principals. All of the principals interviewed also saw this dyad coaching model as positive and if choosing who to coach them, picked both district specialists, principal supervisors, and the two together. One principal said, “It seems like we're all a team working towards a common goal” (P-6, Int. 2). Another stated, “they're very complimentary of each other. . . There's a lot of trust between them” (P-1, Int. 2). These comments speak to the positives of implementing coaching dyads and coaches working as teams who support principals.
Focus on Goals

All of the coaches in this study expressed the necessity of goals. The second most often coded theme with 54 codes from all nine coaches, were comments focused on goals, despite no direct questions concerning goals being asked in the interviews. Centering coaching conversations around goals is a fundamental and necessary component of effective coaching, and the coaches talked about goals in defining coaching, as a vision for their district, and as a measurement of success. For example, a district specialist defined coaching as, “helping someone keep focused on the goal and help them coach him up to accomplish that goal (whether it's an administrator in the building, as far as a school goal, or even a personal, professional goal) you're coaching up on a goal” (DS-5, Int. 2). In terms of an overall desire or vision for the district, one principal supervisor said,

Hopefully we're going back to improving and increasing both adult learning and student learning. The ability to help formulate, you know, a culture of high expectations for all--not only students but adults as well--to increase their ability, learning, understanding and those kinds of things. (PS-2, Int. 2)

Ultimately, the goal becomes a measurement of effective coaching. This is best summarized as, “If the person I'm coaching is meeting their goals, I would say that would be very successful” (DS-6, Int. 2).

Student-centered goals were one type of goal participants talked about. The school district’s leaders defined five domains or capacities that centered around the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of student learning. Those five domains include (a) managing people, data, resources, and processes; (b) shaping a vision of learning; (c) creating a climate hospitable to learning; (d) cultivating leadership in others; and (e) improving instruction within a collaborative
culture (Mendels, 2012). Furthermore, district leaders used indicators such as enrollment in AP and honors courses, ACT and other achievement data, and graduation tracking as success criteria. All interviewed groups referred to these district initiatives and indicators as a place to focus during coaching. One principal supervisor said, “I think the big difference with coaching as opposed to mentoring would be—hey I'm really going to come in and help you with your vision for learning and curriculum and those types of areas” (PS-3, Int. 1). Another principal supervisor indicated that, “It really should be focused on how the outcomes we measure our students' improvement rather than fixing a problem” (PS-2, Int. 1). District specialists also gave specifics on coaching toward goals as one stated,

> We just started this year . . . we go through and we sit down with principals and look at success criteria and try and help them grapple with it and start setting goals by it for what they would like to do to improve. The success criteria is pretty wide ranging. There's a lot of things in there that they can choose to take on. (DS-3, Int. 1)

Four out of six principals also referred to their coaching experience in terms of how they were progressing toward goals. One principal said,

> We have a district wide goal to help our ninth graders be on track for graduation. That's a common goal that we talked about together. . . . These coaching cycles give us a chance to focus really on their learning and how to lead that. (P-5, Int. 2)

Speaking specifically about working with their school’s leadership team, another principal said, “What they helped me to realize was to lead the leadership team, you had to have your focus right, and so our goal and our school improvement plan was [to have] 95% of our students on track for graduation” (P-1, Int. 2). Principals also felt there was a benefit to working as a team. One principal stated,
And then we were also encouraged to go and watch another school's leadership team and sort of just sit and observe how other schools do it and then come back and talk about that. I felt like this year was just focusing on making sure that we're using everybody in our building to make sure we're driving that vision. (P-6, Int. 2)

However, coaches also expressed a concern for when goals were not present in coaching conversations:

Coaching towards goals. I kind of have a coaching, kind of personality in some ways. Some people have told me that. . . but I realized that doesn't mean I'm coaching towards goals and so that's something that I need to be better at. (PS-1, Int. 2)

A district specialist offered further insight when they said,

Because of how we went about our coaching sessions, there wasn't a particular goal that they identified. The principal didn't say, I want to improve in this area of working with my leadership team. It was more, ‘Hey, what did you see in that leadership team meeting?’ But we didn't really have a focus beforehand as far as what is it that I should be looking for. Is there something in particular that you want me to observe. (DS-2, Int. 2)

Some of the coaching was done with both the principal supervisor and district specialist meeting with several principals for the purpose of coaching a group to solve problems. Coaching in these situations was on a group level, and goals were a major focus in these meetings; however, coaches found that in this format it was difficult to identify a common goal. A district specialist explained the struggles in setting goals as a team when they said,

But I'll be honest, and getting them to set goals, as a team of principals, not as individual principals, that's hard, too. A lot of principals don't have a goal other than surviving, but
surviving isn't good enough for our kids. We need a little bit more. But the goal part is hard. (DS-3, Int. 2)

Whether successful or not in reaching goals, the participants clearly understood the centrality of goals as the purpose for coaching, indicated by how often they spoke about importance of goals.

One technique used by the coaches was to use questions as a means to explore the thinking in the principals they coached. Unsolicited during interviews, 100% of the coaches in the study used questions to help principals process and solve problems. A principal supervisor explained why they asked questions when they said, “And so it's their questions that I'm trying to explore more than mine” and gave examples of questions, “What's on their mind? What are they struggling with or what are they thinking about? What's keeping them up at night?” (PS-1, Int. 2). Another coach explained their process with team coaching when they asked, “What do you guys see from this? What are you learning? What story is behind this? So it was a very nonthreatening opportunity to explore it” (PS-2, Int. 2). Another principal supervisor said, “It was around the vision for learning. What's your school goal? What do you want to accomplish the division for learning, and then how can we support you with that?” (PS-3, Int. 2). Similarly, one district specialist stated,

That's almost to me 90% of the whole thing is to ask the right questions because truly, I think it just helps somebody pause and think, ‘Oh, I hadn't thought about that well. If I think about that—that's probably how I might solve this.’ You know, that's all. That's all you're doing is helping plant a question. That, to me, is the magic of it. (DS-5, Int. 2)

Coaches understood how questions kept the principal in the driver’s seat of their own goals and problem solving. One district specialist also described this by saying, “Trying to learn how to ask the right questions that help the person you're coaching to feel that there's that power
within themselves to answer and to come up with those things with their own critical thinking and creativity and some of their own six C's” (DS-1, Int. 1). As a coach with experience as a principal, this might be difficult to do. One principal supervisor explained this difficulty,

I have more experience than most of my principals so it's easy for me to say, ‘Here's what I do, or do this, or try this or that.’ So one of the thoughts is I need to take a step back and just explore their thinking with questions, as opposed to telling them what I would do. And to be honest, I get caught into that if I'm not careful. I often, as I'm driving up to the school, I think—remember, listen and ask. Don't tell. And again, there's a little bit of room for me to go in and say you can't do this. I mean, there's times where I have to do that. But we're talking about issues that are keeping them up at night and that they're trying to move their school in learning areas is where I'm trying to stay, when it comes to coaching. (PS-1, Int. 2)

The skill of asking questions leads to positioning the principal as their own problem solver. As this last quote indicates, coaches knew they needed to maintain a coaching position rather than one of advice giving, and 67% of coaches referred directly to developing this skill. One district specialist mimicked this idea by stating,

Like when you look at data, it's really tempting to say, oh boy, we really need to work on that. But then that turns into my goal as the coach, not into their goal. . . they need to come up with their goals and our job is to support them and help them chase those. (DS-3, Int. 2)

Interestingly, only two of the six principals talked about the coach’s use of questions and maintaining a coaching position; however, both recognized their ownership in solving their own problems when coaches intentionally kept themselves from telling the principal what to do. One
principal said, “I've had [my supervisor] asked me, ‘Well, have you thought about this or tell me your thinking on this right.’ So they'll ask questions that will provoke my thinking into where I'm going” (P-1, Int. 2). According to another principal, his coaches allowed him to make his own decisions. “I feel like they are very much a support and not trying to tell us what to do. Which is good” (P-5, Int. 2). Whether principals recognize it or not yet, these coaches are intentionally using questions and invoking the “magic” of questions to position principals as the owners of their own thinking.

**Future Support in Coaching**

As the leaders of the district in this study move forward, refining practices in their principal coaching initiative, coaches desired specific supports which are summarized in Figure 4. Most prominent of the supports request was to have a district structure of coaching, including an articulated vision. Of the nine coaches, eight requested this support. The next three (effectively using questions, building relationships of trust, and focusing on goals) are not only the findings already addressed in this study, but they are also the main aspects of coaching found in coaching literature.
Coaches are interested in creating a district structure where everyone has a coach. This would expand the current coaching structure in order to facilitate others beyond the principal supervisors to be coaches but would also dedicate time for coaching on a more consistent basis. How this could be structured was indicated in a couple of different ways. First, coaches and principals are requesting a system where everyone has a coach, including themselves. One district specialist explained why when they said,

If I had the opportunity to really get in and really start doing it, then I would really need at that point is probably a coach myself where I could then [say], ‘Here's what I've tried. Here's how it's going. Here's my goals with coaching.’ And then have someone who knows coaching to be coaching me as I'm trying to coach others. (DS-6, Int. 2)
Another summed this up as, “We're really starting to build that culture of coaching . . . everyone deserves a coach, everyone is a coach” (DS-5, Int. 2). Every principal in the study expressed the desire to continue having a coach. One principal confirmed both the benefits of having a coach and having coaching expand to all levels in the district when they said,

When I often think of coaching, I think of it at the teaching level, but it really goes into any level. And so, [I would want] access to a coach or somebody to help me do better at what I do—from working with teachers, to parents, to being a better overall principal of the building. (P-6, Int. 1)

Second, expanding who coaches within the district was also desired by coaches. One principal supervisor expressed the value and conflict of having more people coach. Explaining the desire to have a partner to coach with, one principal supervisor said, “And then also provide that partner for me. Some people didn't like a partner. And that was interesting to me” (PS-3, Int. 2). Not surprisingly, all six district specialists spoke about this structure. For instance:

I think the supervisors feel like they're the people that should be coaching and they are. But that doesn't mean myself or others who've been principals or directors could be a help and support. I think they're beginning to see that but I think more doors will open in the future with the approach of our new superintendent. (DS-5, Int. 2)

The practical reasons for this expansion were described by another district supervisor,

It would allow us to bring in experts into whatever problem of practice the principals are having. So, we can't expect that every principal supervisor knows everything. But if they were to partner with some of the experts at the district level, they would be able to bring in the right people to help solve each unique problem that schools might have. (DS-4, Int. 2)
This expanded structure, being deliberately identified, would clarify for principals the support available. According to one district specialist,

Even though we’ve accomplished a lot of things, we haven’t been deliberate with our principals about the role that we [as specialists] are going to play as a coach. . . . I believe that’s what will move [us] forward in the future—we’re going to get really clear with our principals about how we’re going to be coaching them. (DS-2, Int. 2)

Third, a vision of coaching would include consistent and dedicated time for coaching, according to the participants. One principal explained, “Generally, you know, my supervisor is interested in [coaching]. But I don’t feel like he has a lot of time to dedicate to helping me get the right resources or the conversations” (P-2, Int. 2). Similarly, another principal stated,

Probably just the consistency of it, it's, it's never consistent, and so it's hard to really start to build momentum with it, where it's sort of like, Oh, something came up. We can't meet. Oh, something else. And so, that's just the trickiest part probably in it.” (P-6, Int. 2)

During the course of this study, a new superintendent was appointed. One of his initial priorities was to give principal supervisors more dedicated time to be in their assigned schools. All three principal supervisors saw this as a positive change. One principal supervisor expressed,

A really big change in our district superintendent has really changed my position. And so, I'm happy. I'm excited. It's less meetings for me, and it's more getting out and being a part of coaching and supporting schools is what he is envisioning. (PS-3, Int. 2)

Another, when asked about the biggest challenge in coaching, said,

So I guess it would be just time, because we're all so busy. . . . And as a district we're addressing that. As supervisors of schools, we've been freed up to be available more often
to our principals to help them now. . . You know, I think that is the big [struggle]—having the structured time, which I think we have in place much better now. (PS-2, Int. 2)

In summary, these structural changes would create a system where everyone would have a coach, where others beyond principal supervisors would be assigned as coaches, and where dedicating the time for coaching would be wanted by both coaches and principals alike. A district specialist summed this vision up best by saying, “But that we were all just one team—principals, supervisors, and directors, all working and collaborating together, coaching, and getting everyone to better spaces” (DS-1, Int. 2).

**Self-Directed Professional Development**

What professional development did principal supervisors and district specialists find meaningful in this experience of coaching principals? In one word: choice. Although participants did not engage in a traditional, collective professional learning experience, they did organize themselves as self-directed learners to understand and implement coaching. Two aspects of the Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) professional learning framework—the use of experts and having a content focus—was overwhelmingly evident. All 15 coaches specifically named books they were reading and experiences they had had with experts in the field of coaching. These included conversations and trainings with coaching experts, such as Knight and DeWitt, as well as reading their books (DeWitt, 2019; Knight, 2018). Other authors addressed by the coaches were Killion et al. (2012), Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018), and the Wallace Foundation reports (Goldring, Clark et al., 2020; Goldring et al., 2018; Goldring, Rogers, & Clark, 2020). Their individual and collective reading evolved into a book study group that included top-level district leaders, district principal supervisors, and district specialists. One participant stated, “We had all of the directors who had been principals before, and all of the supervisors, and even our assistant
superintendents and superintendent—we were all involved in this book study that we were doing on Fridays” (DS-1, Int. 2). Another participant explained it saying,

- We had real momentum. We met over the summer with the cabinet and every Friday, even up to our superintendent. We kind of approached him and said, ‘Really what we want is a coaching culture in our district and really, I think the best way we can get it is if we show that everyone is going to be coached.’ (DS-6, Int. 1)

It was explained during interviews that this team dispersed once the new, COVID Pandemic school year began due to immense management demands; however, a smaller team of four district specialists continued to meet and talk about coaching. The remaining three secondary principal supervisors in the district and two other district specialists eventually joined with the desire to implement coaching in their areas of influence.

Another characteristic of effective professional development involves active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). All principal supervisors and district specialists who participated coached principals in either a formal or informal capacity. Each coach had a desire to try coaching. This active learning made them reflect on the above aspects of coaching, namely, their relationships of trust, the use of questioning in order to position themselves as a coach and maintaining a focus on goals. The excitement for participating as a coach was expressed by a principal supervisor when they said, “Well for me, I just enjoyed it. I think it was nice that I was dealing with learning again” (PS-3, Int. 2). As expressed here, the learning became central to their collective work even after the derailment of the pandemic, and coaching became a vehicle to reflect and plan more intentionally around learning. Another district supervisor also expressed their commitment to coaching when they said, “The reason why
coaching is essential to me is because I just believe that that's the only way that significant change can happen in an organization, in a team, in an individual” (DS-2, Int. 2).

Overall, all seven components of the Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) framework were evident in the experiences of the coaches. Table 1 identifies findings and how those findings connect with the effective professional development characteristics. Oftentimes, several components are identified within the findings of this study. Ultimately, the heart of coaching is choice, and this choice is what leads to active learning. It is significant that the individuals in this study chose their own professional learning paths through their experiences while learning to coach.
**Table 1**

*Summary of Findings in Relation to the Professional Development Framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding Category</th>
<th>Connection to Professional Development Framework*</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trusting Relationship</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coaching and Expert Support</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback and Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Dyads/Teams</td>
<td>Active Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Models and Modeling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feedback and Reflection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coaching and Expert Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on Goals</td>
<td>Content Focus</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Active Learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feedback and Reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching Structure</td>
<td>Sustained Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice in Professional Development</td>
<td>Active Learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As presented in (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)*

**Discussion and Implications**

This case study describes how one district implemented leadership coaching for principals. The process coaches and principals underwent to increase their capacities is also a commentary on adult learning. Knowles (1975) described andragogical theory as adults hav[ing] a psychological need to be self-directing, that their richest resource for learning is the analysis of their own experience, that they become ready to learn as they experience the need to learn in order to confront developmental tasks, and that their orientation toward learning is one of concern for immediate application. (p. 87)
The journey of the coaches in this one district was not a prescribed program, nor did it follow traditional professional development mechanisms; however, deep learning came through the application of their own developed coaching model—in other words, learning by doing.

**Self-Directed Professional Development**

Knight’s seven partnership principles (Knight, 2018), Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh’s GROWTH model (2018), Bloom et al.’s blended coaching model (2005), as well as other prominent coaching experts identify trusting relationships, a focus on goals, and the development of a coaching language and coach positioning as essential characteristics of coaching. Through the findings of this study, it is shown that without extensive or formalized training, district coaches can still clearly identify the core components of coaching. Their experience of coaching principals made these aspects relevant by contextualizing conversations around goals. The district coaches also felt the necessity for vulnerability, safety, and trusting relationships in order to engage in coaching conversations. Furthermore, each coach was cognizant of trying to maintain a position that facilitated thinking rather than directing the action of the principal. The fact that coaches recognized the characteristics as important is a significant step in confirming coaching models along with the research behind those models. More significant, however, is how these coaches came to use and develop these skills, independent of formal training, confirming the magnitude of adults directing their own learning.

A team of district leaders began by reading and discussing leadership coaching experts (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; DeWitt, 2019; Knight, 2018). The experts this team discussed helped them lay a foundation for thinking about coaching and helped establish a desire to support principals more fully. For these reasons, a team of secondary principal supervisors and district specialists developed a conceptual plan for implementing principal coaching. Although
their plans included professional development, there was no readily available expert to do the training, and the immediate priorities of a pandemic took precedence. An assumption could be made that the principal supervisors and district specialists were not prepared to coach. Typically, professional development would include structured discussions around coaching principles and the practice of coaching skills. Coaching training would generally have participants practice active listening strategies such as restating or summarizing and asking clarifying and probing questions. It would also involve discussions on how to develop language to ask questions in order to elicit thinking in those they coach. Developing coaches so they know how to maintain a coaching position and when to transition into being a consultant or collaborator based on the needs of the coachee, is also of great importance.

Coaching skills are nuanced and require time to develop. The coaches in this study were not trained in any of these skills. They instead dove right into coaching. Their choice of who does the coaching, whom to coach, and how to go about coaching was all part of the experience and their subsequent self-learning. In the end, learning by doing within the context of their own coaching structure was a powerful professional development experience.

In the Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) professional development framework, they define professional development as “structured professional learning that results in changes,” and they conclude that authentic, deeply embedded, and contextualized active learning is one of the seven effective components. However, Zepeda et al. (2014) found that principal professional learning was rarely self-directed. Zepeda et al.’s research is rooted in adult learning theory. When participants have choice in their own learning, it is authentic to their own goals; therefore, the content, models, and collaboration (other characteristics of effective professional development) become relevant. Furthermore, the learner more readily seeks out feedback and effectively
engages in meaningful reflection. Self-direction is not an overt characteristic of prior research; however, in this study, self-direction was integral to the individual learning of each participant and the potential sustainability of the learned skills. In this study, coaches asked for training in goal development, questioning strategies, and how to maintain a coaching position. In fact, by the end of the study, they desired more structure for the requested training. Their self-directed experience of coaching not only solidified the value of the coaching skills but also made them aware of areas in their skill set that needed improvement at their level. The coaches’ authentic experience led them to ask for specific training—a much more powerful setting for meaningful learning. District leaders should consider and incorporate the desires of the participants and give more authentic choices in professional development in order to develop the leaders in their organization.

**Organizational Change to Support Principals**

Researchers working for the Wallace Foundation have developed a research-based structure for redesigning the principal supervisor role through focusing on instructional leadership, limiting the number of principals their supervisors oversee, developing supervisor capacity to better support principals, and using other central office personnel to support the supervisor role redesign (Goldring, Clark et al., 2020; Goldring et al., 2018; Goldring, Rogers, & Clark, 2020). Based on the findings in this study, the work of the Wallace Foundation researchers’ redesign for the principal supervisor role can be both confirmed and expanded in a number of relevant ways.

Overwhelmingly, coaches and principals sought out more time to coach. It is evident that the participating principals were eager to have support so that they could increase their effectiveness as instructional leaders in their schools. Likewise, principal supervisors and district
specialists saw a need to reconfigure their duties in order to make time for the coaching process. In fact, the district recently eliminated executive meetings so as to accommodate principal supervisors being in schools more often. Principal supervisors felt it was a positive change. Executive district leaders had to grapple with their district’s current structure and their vision of district supervisors being a closer support for principals. The first step taken was to change the current superintendent’s cabinet into a district leadership team that governs the district, supports the work of schools and supports the superintendent’s oversight of the district. As a result, principal supervisors are now part of an advisory council that meets less frequently than the leadership team. These structural changes not only allow for principal supervisors to be more available to principals but also more present in their schools. Of course, the change in meeting schedules alone does not create an effective coaching model; however, it does give the opportunity for supervisors to develop trusting relationships with principals and seek to understand school priorities and the necessary goals to better support the vision of the school.

The researchers at the Wallace Foundation generated the PSI reports with the intent to understand and leverage the principal supervisor as the main support of principals and thereby increase the principal’s effectiveness (Goldring et al., 2018). Principal supervisors are in the best position and have the most access to support principals through coaching; however, from this study’s findings, principals clearly are looking for coaches who have expertise regardless of their position. This suggests redefining more roles than just the principal supervisor role as coach. Different from the model presented in the PSI reports which places central office personnel taking over duties outside of coaching to free the principal supervisors to coach (Goldring et al., 2018), in this case study, the model generated by the participating district’s leaders expanded from using only principal supervisors as coaches and included other district leaders for support.
as well. Both types of coaches, principal supervisors, and district specialists, saw the value of having a wider array of coaches. Furthermore, the coaching dyad or team model offered other, additional benefits.

Through the dyad or team model, leaders were able to create an internal support structure for the coaches. As principal supervisors invited other specialists to their coaching conversations with principals, they discovered that it allowed for reflection on conversations with principals as well as refinement of coaching skills as they designed questions together. The partnership amongst the teams not only benefited principals in having more individuals as part of the discussions, but it also benefited the coaches as they developed coaching skills. Overall, the redesign of who coaches principals is part of the choices these district leaders are making to further their vision of implementing leadership coaches. As district leaders develop a leadership coaching system, considering all types of leaders who could be coaches would ensure a broader pool of support, giving principals more individuals with whom they could generate a trusted relationship. As adult learners, the principals also have choice. They want and need to select their own coach(es). Because coaching requires trusting relationships, the person being coached must be able to be vulnerable with their coach; therefore, choice in whom to be coached by is integral to the success of the experience. Principals value their supervisors and any others they might see as an expert as supports for helping them solve problems. The choice to be coached is a type of self-directed professional learning.

Figure 5 illustrates a revision of the model of coaching learned from this study. First, the two-way arrows between coach and principal intends to show that both are vulnerable partners as they learn to coach or are being coached. Second, the model suggests principal supervisors and district specialists are both in a position to provide the coaching support for principals. The
teaming of these coaches also has proven to be worthwhile and beneficial for both the principal and the coach. Finally, the idea of how the coaches engaged in professional development themselves rather than it being imposed is significant in how we think about future models of this nature. In other words, the act of coaching drives what coaches are seeking for support in the moment of learning to coach.

**Figure 5**

*Revised Model for “Principles of Coaching for Coaching of Principals”*

The implications of this study begin by confirming what we already understand about best principles of coaching. The principles of relationship building and coaching language continue to be the foundations of coaching. More specifically, using questioning strategies to allow for the coachee’s ownership in their own development requires attention and intentionality in practice. Furthermore, the importance of choice in coaching is confirmed, yet also highlights new layers important for districts to consider. This district’s model allowed for the possibility of more than only a principal supervisor or only a district specialist to coach principals. In fact, their
choice to combine forces contributed to their own development of coaching skills as well as expanded the support structure to principals.

Finally, a new principle—learning by doing—was realized. As districts consider their own path for supporting principals through coaching, they should place value on the experience itself. For this study, the district leaders initiated study and discussion sessions among themselves. It was not the purchase of a program or the commission of a consultant or expert which led to their success but their willingness to engage in coaching without knowing exactly how to go about it. From their coaching experiences, they developed coaching skills and identified which skills need more development. After the year of coaching, they were now asking questions to advance their own learning.

As a district leader myself, I was surprised by how committed the participants were in implementing coaching because it goes against how we usually initiate new programs in districts. Even being mindful of adult learning theory and knowing the way we learn best, we often forget that our curiosity is a strong force. Wondering what would happen sparked experimentation which led to asking further questions and being more clear on how to move forward in terms of skill development and structured time. As you consider how to move forward in your own district, be willing to explore and capitalize on what your leaders are already doing, questioning, and discussing. In short, remember the power behind learning by doing.

**Limitations**

Admittedly, this study is limited to one district’s experience and only reports the journey of secondary principal supervisors and a few of the junior high principals that they supervise. A study which expands into elementary and high school would provide a broader insight into how coaching is perceived, structured, and received by both groups—coaches and coachees. The
homogeneous makeup of the participants might also limit generalizability of the study. Ideally, analyzing data based on gender, age, and ethnicity would present a richer picture of findings. Finally, interviews were limited in scope to generalizable questions to uncover the experiences of coaching. Because of this generalized focus, this study is limited in the depth that could be uncovered in the participant experiences, thus potentially depriving the possible discovery of aspects of coaching that could be improved upon or applied elsewhere.

Conclusion

In this study, I set out to determine what can be learned from the pursuit of establishing a coaching model for principals within a district. The preliminary research question was to discover what professional development strategies were most effective and what the leaders learned during the process; however, for many reasons, formal professional learning was never established. What appeared straightforward at the onset of the study turned into a lesson on what really influences learning—choice. To emphasize, self-direction is at the heart of effective coaching models. The coachee, or the one being coached, must agree to the coaching in order to be vulnerable with their coach. Furthermore, these coaching conversations should center around the coachee’s goals and action steps, not the coach’s. Likewise, self-direction or choice is shown to be a powerful motivator of learning, in general. Despite and perhaps because of a pandemic-derailed, structured professional development plan, district leaders found their own path of learning while implementing coaching for their principals. They were reflective and could therefore articulate what they needed to support their own learning by way of vision, time, and specific skill development.

Researchers in further studies could intentionally seek more understanding of how and why individuals make their decisions regarding their organization. For instance, comparison
studies could be conducted of different coaching models for principals—how and why a district implemented peer coaching or brought in external coaches, or how districts used principal supervisors and other district leaders in their model. Another area for study could be a deeper look into how a principal supervisor balances the coaching and evaluating roles with regards to the choices made in the approach to coaching, the relationships built, and the ideologies behind both coaching and evaluating. Without question, the act of coaching and being coached is not a linear approach but makes those involved highly mindful of the individual’s direction for learning. It is not a program evaluation but rather an opportunity to explore the thinking of both the coach and the coachee as they both go about solving the problems of practice within their own context. To be sure, “learning by doing” has greater meaning when an individual’s choices are valued in the process.
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APPENDIX A

Review of Literature

Instructional Leadership

Leithwood et al. (2004) set out to uncover the effects of principal leadership on student learning as well as the leadership competencies that were most prevalent in effective leaders. They discovered that setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization were the most consistent practices of effective principals. Influenced by this earlier research, Grissom et al. (2021) synthesized nearly two decades of research in a recent report stating that

Across six rigorous studies estimating principals’ effects using panel data, principals’ contributions to student achievement were nearly as large as the average effects of teachers identified in similar studies. Principals’ effects, however, are larger in scope because they are averaged over all students in a school, rather than a classroom. (p. xiv)

The results fell into three main categories of skill—supporting classroom instruction, developing people, and managing organizations by using strategic thinking, data, and resources. Additionally, four leadership behaviors proved important: (a) engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, (b) building a productive climate, (c) facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities, and (d) managing personnel and resources strategically (Grissom et al., 2021). Grissom et al.’s work captures the importance of principals being the instructional leaders of their schools because of the influence they have on the work of teachers.

Coaching Principal Instructional Leaders

In their seminal study of 12 effective school districts, Murphy and Hallinger (1988) uncovered how effective districts, similar to effective schools, take on an instructional and curricular focus, including a strong instructional leadership from the superintendent. In response
to this research, district leaders began to change the function of district offices from a purely management role to a support role through systemic coordination and alignment of district and school goals. Authors like Fullan and Quinn (2015) developed frameworks on how to establish this type of district coherence. For their research, the concepts of having a focusing direction, of cultivating a collaborative culture, of securing accountability, as well as deepening learning within a district, have become the focus for district and school leaders. Grissom et al. (2021) defined some of the specific skills and behaviors that should be encouraged and developed in principals. Within the realm of principal development, principals have various sources for their own professional learning. Traditional professional development includes conferences, workshops, university courses, as well as mentoring for some novice principals. In a national survey, around 50% of all principals were currently or had received coaching (Wise & Cavazos, 2017).

Coaching principals as a means of building their capacity has been a greater focus of study in the past ten years. There are many terms used to describe the coaching of leaders. Leadership coaching, executive coaching, cognitive coaching, and transformative coaching all have subtle differences while adhering to the same basics of coaching. Warren and Kelsen (2013) simply define leadership coaching as providing support to principals along with structure to contextualize their training. Wise and Hammack (2011) studied the specific coaching competencies that principals considered to be most influential and found that the competencies mentioned by principals fell into three categories—establishing a coaching relationship, communicating effectively, and facilitating learning and performance. These were used to develop a Leadership Coaching Competencies Inventory. Cognitive coaching is a branded coaching model that emphasizes the relationship of honesty, respect, and empathy between coach
and coachee, which allows the coachee to be self-directed as the coach guides the individual through conversations (Rogers et al., 2016).

Other studies also describe a partnership which uncovers thinking and examines a leader’s abilities through conversation. The terms executive coaching and leadership coaching are used interchangeably in Farver and Holt’s (2015) research. Their coaching responsibilities include building vision and setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning. Aguilar (2017) uses yet another term, transformational coaching, to describe the uncovering of behaviors, beliefs, and the ways of being of school leaders that can be examined with a coach. Overall, leadership coaching, across its various terms, has become increasingly more prominent in research. As the above summary indicates, coaching, regardless of the model, is based on relationships and uses communication strategies for the primary purpose of developing the thinking and skills of the coachee.

One often studied coaching component is the use of feedback. Feedback from a coach or supervisor to a principal is intended to solicit reflection as skills are being developed. Among the standards presented in the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2015), feedback is referred to several times. In Standard 2, principal supervisors should “offer timely and actionable feedback.” Standard 3 states that the use of evidence from teachers, students, and parents along with evaluations from colleagues—and the principal’s own personal reflections—all provide valuable feedback to a principal. In Standard 4, principal supervisors gather evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, throughout the evaluation process, which gives insight into the school leader’s instructional leadership capacity. When feedback is paired with coaching, principals have a more effective means to direct their development.
In a study evaluating the efficacy of feedback and coaching intervention, principals who received only the feedback from teachers used the information for improvement; however, when ongoing coaching sessions were added, principals perceived the information as more valid (Bickman et al., 2012). In another study, researchers focused specifically on how principals processed feedback with a coach (Goff et al., 2015). Goff et al. (2015) studied the effects of feedback when it is paired with coaching during the development of a principal’s leadership practice. Goff et al. found that feedback alone was not enough to induce leadership behavior change in principals; however, coaching (in sessions over time) helped principals to contextualize, make sense of, and translate the feedback they received into practiced changes. Other studies also identify feedback as a key component to coaching support (Farver, 2014; Huff et al., 2013; Loving, 2011). In the five-phase model of coaching used by Huff et al. (2013), once the “groundwork” for relationships is built, the next step involves assessment and feedback. In this phase, coaches review the teachers’ feedback with principals by asking questions in order to help paint a clear picture of what teachers are saying while also probing the principal for what they learn from the feedback. In other words, when coaches used targeted questions about feedback, principals could reflect more critically on their school’s context. From a leadership perspective, it is also important to receive feedback as the leader/coach to set the example of growth within your own professional journey (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). In summary, feedback alone is valuable in terms of professional and personal growth; however, with a coach who helps to facilitate processing the feedback, the research clearly shows that a coach not only helps validate the feedback itself but also helps produce transferable changes in a principal’s behavior.
Research also describes how setting goals aids leaders toward meaningful growth in their schools and/or in their own leadership capacities. Coaching is measured by progress toward developing competencies or goal achievement. Farver and Holt (2015) concluded that executive coaching helps leaders establish a vision and mission, builds trusting relationships, and facilitates goal attainment. Likewise, Huff et al.’s (2013) five-phase coaching model involves a coach assisting a principal to develop meaningful goals that are specific, measurable, and time-specific that are also challenging and accepted by the principal. Wise and Hammack (2011) focused on the most valuable coaching competencies from the perspective of principals which resulted in the development of the leadership coaching competencies inventory. From previous research, Wise and Hammack (2011) began with 154 competencies which were reduced to 54 and later to 16 of the best practices. In the area of facilitating learning and performance, the coach helps principals identify and prioritize goals, manage the process of change, brainstorm possibilities, and focus on the big picture.

Warren and Kelsen (2013) focused on the effects of leadership coaching on the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of leaders in underperforming, urban schools. Not only did principals significantly grow in their capacity in the nine leadership skills found in the Mid-Continent Research in Education Laboratory’s balanced leadership framework, Warren and Kelsen (2013) also showed increases in the academic performance of students. In another more specific study on coaching novice principals, Loving (2011) sought to find what principal practices were developed as a result of coaching and if those skills continued after coaching ended. Loving found that coaching contributed to better skills in data collection and analysis, increases of confidence, improved uses of feedback, and the ability to identify and keep a focus. Furthermore, coachees retained these skills after the coaching had ceased (Loving, 2011).
evident from these studies that effective coaching involves identifying meaningful goals along with the action steps necessary to assist educational leaders in achieving personal as well as organizational improvement.

Who performs the coaching and how the coach interacts with other individuals in the organization may alter the experience of those being coached and may also require a shift in organizational structure. In a 2017 national study, 50% of principals across most demographic groups that had received coaching, found the experience supportive and beneficial. Of those who were coached, 85% felt they became better principals and 72% perceived leadership coaching contributed to student achievement growth (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). The literature surrounding coaching, however, is not consistent on who does the coaching. Wise and Cavazos (2017) reported that 52% of principals had coaching provided by the district, 24% from a state agency, 21% from a professional organization, and 3% from another provider. Unlike the coaching of teachers, which almost always comes from within the organization, leadership coaching uses both external and internal coaching structures. External coaches or consultants, retired principals, district office leaders, or principal supervisors are all avenues providing possible coaches for principals.

Using external coaches or retired principals has benefits. James-Ward (2011) describes a system where a team of external coaches works closely with district management to develop a cohesive system for communication. Coaches also became the indirect voice of the principals to the district, giving the district leadership insight into how principals were thinking. However, because the coaches were outside of the organization, and had limited understanding of district initiatives, the chances increased that district visions and goals would be miscommunicated (James-Ward, 2011). In a study by Rogers et al. (2016), experienced principals were recruited to
receive cognitive coaching training. These coaches were then paired with new principals from other districts. Because of their external role, the coaching interactions were never evaluative but rather cognitive in nature, clarifying and strategizing on goals or problems to solve. Similarly, outside coaches were used in another study where principals and coaches were intentionally matched up according to experience and demographic makeup. This match gave an added level of understanding which was appreciated by the principals being coached (Warren & Kelsen, 2013). Overall, principals benefit from external coaches because these coaches do not mix evaluation and coaching and they potentially bring in added understanding because of similar experiences; on the other hand, external coaches also lack the district perspective needed to connect school goals to district initiatives.

An obvious structure within the organization is to use a principal supervisor or another district leader as a coach. In the *Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards* (CCSSO, 2015), the enhanced role of principal supervisors is described:

Traditionally, principal supervisors have focused on ensuring that school leaders, and the buildings they run, complied with local policies and state regulations. Now that job description is under review. Recent research suggests that principal supervisors can positively affect student results by helping principals grow as instructional leaders. With the right training and support, they can assess and evaluate principals’ current leadership practices and identify professional learning opportunities most likely to lead to improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and achievement. Moreover, they can ensure that principals’ work and vision align with district goals, and that the central office effectively supports school leaders, schools and student success. (p. 2)
Several recent studies advocate for leveraging the principal supervisor as the coach (Baker & Bloom, 2017; Bouffard, 2019; Goldring et al., 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Minnesota Department of Education, 2016; Saltzman, 2016; Thessin, 2019). During the Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI), two of the five most emphasized areas of training were skills for coaching principals and coaching principals on giving teachers actionable feedback (Goldring et al., 2018). Honig and Rainey (2019) suggest that internal, principal supervisor coaches, rather than external coaches, should be the primary support on teaching and learning. Likewise, Thessin (2019) confirms the value of the partnership between principal supervisors and principals as instructional leaders. Within the Guide to Coaching School Principals in Minnesota, it is stated that “a principal supervisor’s primary responsibility as both supervisor and coach is the same: to support the development of effective principals” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016, p. 5). The framework describes the competencies of coaching that can be incorporated into evaluation as well as into principal development, clearly placing the principal supervisor in both roles. Although still in its infancy, principal supervisors taking on the role of coach is an increasing focus for districts.

**Supporting Principal Supervisors as Instructional Leaders**

The role of the principal supervisor is also in flux within the education community. The Model Principal Supervisor Standards (CCSSO, 2015) are based on the premise that principal supervisors should intentionally develop principals, receive training, reflect on the supervision process, connect with principals through a coaching relationship that includes leading professional learning communities and using data sources, all while being mindful of adult learning and professional development best practices. The effectiveness of the principal supervisor includes the following standards:
Standard 7: Principal Supervisors engage in their own development and continuous improvement to help principals grow as instructional leaders.

Standard 8: Principal Supervisors lead strategic change that continuously elevates the performance of schools and sustains high-quality educational programs and opportunities across the district. (CCSSO, 2015, p.9)

Principal supervisors are also subject to the standards outlined in the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015) in order to best support principals in their development in these areas. In conceptualizing this new focus, researchers for the Wallace Foundation redefined the role of principal supervisors in the PSI in the following five ways:

- They revised the principal supervisors’ job description to focus on instructional leadership.
- They reduced principal supervisors’ span of control (the number of principals they oversee) and changed how supervisors are assigned to principals.
- They added the responsibility of training supervisors and developing their capacity to support principals.
- They added the responsibility of developing systems to identify and train new supervisors (succession planning).
- And they strengthened the central office structures in order to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisor’s role (Goldring et al., 2018, p. 3)

Overall, systems are changing to accommodate for the new theories and research surrounding the role of the principal supervisor.
In 2012, most principal supervisor development “was largely *ad hoc* in nature, and was not part of a systemic, sustained program of professional learning focused on growing supervisors’ expertise in curriculum and instruction” (Cochran et al., 2020, p. 13). By 2018, however, 65% reported being part of some type of district directed professional learning (Cochran et al., 2020). Similarly, researchers for the Wallace Foundation reported that specific trainings for principal supervisors increased from 61% in 2015 to 80% in 2017 (Goldring et al., 2018). The top reported professional development topics from the Cochran et al. (2020) study included 44% on quality classroom observations, 40% on improving student achievement, 37% on using student performance data, 33% on coaching principals, and 31% on actionable/specific feedback to principals. Of those trainings, only 53% of the time did the trainings focus on a participant’s particular challenges, 50% of the time on sustained, systemic development for themselves, and 45% of the time on giving participants opportunities for feedback. Although the districts participating in the Cochran study found the content meaningful, principal supervisors didn’t believe that the training was directly tied to their own goals or problems, and the trainings did not include the needed coaching support, sustainability, or feedback needed for meaningful and lasting personalized, professional learning (Cochran et al., 2020). However, in the PSI study, Goldring et al. (2018) emphasized individualized development. The leaders of the participating districts in the study implemented one-on-one coaching that included both personal implementation of new practices and feedback alongside peer observations (Goldring et al., 2018).

With this new direction for principal supervisors, it stands to reason that more support is needed in developing their capacity to support principals. Honig and Rainey (2019) examined how principal supervisors develop a teaching and learning approach. They concluded that
principal supervisors were in a better position to assist principals in their development, and they suggested that meta-coaching principal supervisors in order to develop their own coaching skills as one of the best ways to support principals. Baker and Bloom (2017) describe a system which supports principal supervisors by giving feedback and conducting observation walkthroughs of coaching sessions. In their conceptual report, the principal supervisors of Long Beach Unified School District would establish lab days where a team of principal supervisors watch a fellow principal supervisor and principal visit classrooms and engage in a coaching debrief afterward. Research is still new in this area and worthy of further development.

Developing principal supervisors to be coaches is essential for their ability to effectively work with principals. In the PSI report, Goldring et al. (2018) reported that coaching “was not grounded in a common meaning” and that “ambiguity and confusion existed in some districts around the meaning of the term coaching and how integrated coaching should be in supervisors’ work in their schools” (p. 38). But by developing the principal supervisor in the principles (“ples”) of coaching, a new role for principal supervisors is taking shape. According to Cochran et al. (2020), principal supervisors need more support including more coaching time and strategies, and more time working and planning with principals. Honig and Rainey (2019) found that it wasn’t the outside coach that was key in developing and sustaining a teaching and learning stance but the autonomy of the principal supervisors to work together as a team, buffered against outside pressures, and utilizing the job-embedded support of each other that made the difference.

In the Washington D.C. and Tulsa, Oklahoma principal supervisor programs, professional development included meeting weekly for training on leadership development and coaching, and also regularly using walk-throughs to observe their colleagues and provide feedback (Saltzman, 2016). As part of the Long Beach Unified School District’s principal supervisor lab days
concept, one principal supervisor would pose a current problem of practice and a question for the

group of principal supervisors to consider before participating in the walkthrough of the school.

After the classroom visits, a debrief of the observation will occur so as to help principal

supervisors reflect on the effectiveness of the practices they saw, thus allowing them to hone

their coaching skills (Baker & Bloom, 2017). To be sure, the approach districts take in
developing principal supervisors will determine the success in shifting their duties toward
supporting principals as instructional leaders.

Adult Learners

Knowles (1973) put forth the idea of an adult learning theory where adults have a need to

be self-directed learners with support from a facilitator in a context that is convenient for the
learner. Furthermore, Knowles reiterates the need for the learner to have the autonomy to make
their own learning decisions and the need for trainers to guide this learning process (Knowles,
1975, 1989). Coaching models support this premise in that coaches act as the facilitators of an
individual learner’s goals. Professional development research, including the use of coaches,
substantiates the necessity for self-direction for adults to effectively build their own capacity.

Coaching Research

In their seminal study, Joyce and Showers’ (1988) spotlighted the effectiveness of peer-
to-peer coaching in conjunction with other methods of professional development—theory,
demonstration, and practice—as the key to the process of transferring skills. Since then, several
studies have highlighted how coaching is effective in developing skills in teachers. Coaching
literature is plentiful in both research and application. Coaching practitioners such as Bloom et
al. (2005), Kee et al. (2010), Knight (2018), Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018), and others,
have all identified similar elements in their coaching approach: (a) developing relationships of
professional trust, (b) utilizing coaching communication skills like listening and questioning, (c) employing coaching positions based around adult learning theory in order to best support the needs of the coachee, and (d) focusing the coaching on the coachee’s personal or organizational goal for development.

Coaching research began with coaching for teachers. Joyce and Showers first published their report, *Student Achievement through Staff Development*, in 1988 and subsequently transformed traditional professional development from then on, helped to spotlight the value of coaching. Through their research, they sought to determine the compounding effects of a professional development scheme that focused on four major concepts. First, on delivering knowledge through theory. Second, on the addition of models to the theory through a process of demonstration. Third, on participants getting the chance to practice their new skills. And finally, along with the practice, peer coaching would be provided. The transfer of new skills into the classroom was either absent or negligible when only using theory, demonstration, and practice; however, when coaching was added to the professional learning, skill transfer was as high as 95% (Joyce & Showers, 1988). Coaching, it appeared, was the link which had the potential to connect research to the developed practice within the classroom.

The terms coaching and mentoring might appear interchangeable, but researchers distinguish between them while allowing for some overlap. In the *National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching* (Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education [CUREE], 2010) it is suggested that mentoring supports transitions such as the beginning of a career or a change in role where coaching is part of the ongoing professional development of skill and goals in the position. Aguilar (2017) describes a mentor as “a colleague who shares stories and experiences, provides suggestions to navigate the system, and offers technical help” (p. 34).
When coaching new principals, Loving (2011) defines mentoring as giving advice and information while coaching is an inquiry-based collaboration between coach and principal, establishing that coaching led to long-term transferability of skills in novice principals.

Like in the literature related to the coaching teachers, researchers focused on the coaching of principals literature detail the competencies of coaching, the types of coaching, and the coaching results. With regard to the competencies of coaching, the researchers behind the guide to coaching principals in Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016) began with the premise that principal supervisors have the responsibility of being both a supervisor and a coach. Through building relationships, developing communication skills, and utilizing reflection and feedback, principal supervisors can readily engage in establishing a safe environment, keep the principal in charge, coach in a facilitative and collaborative role, advocate for self-awareness, promote experiential learning, and model what they coach. Similarly, Wise and Hammack (2011) reduced earlier research on coaching competencies to just 20 competencies in three categories. Those three categories are coaching relationships, effective communication, and facilitating learning and performance. The literature of coaching of teachers as well as coaching of principals are alike in that researchers have focused on the competencies of relationships, communication, and utilizing reflection strategies.

Researchers have focused coaching models on the development and transfer of new skills from theory to practice. Table 1 illustrates and compares the language between several coaching models while emphasizing similar ideas.
Table A1

A Sample Comparison of Coaching Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESULTS Model</th>
<th>GROWTH Model</th>
<th>IMPACT Cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resolve to change results</td>
<td>Goals (What do you need to achieve?)</td>
<td>Identify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish goal clarity</td>
<td>Reality (What is happening now?)</td>
<td>Current reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek integrity</td>
<td>Options (What could you do?)</td>
<td>Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unveil multiple pathways</td>
<td>Will (What will you do?)</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leverage options</td>
<td>Tactics (How and when will you do it?)</td>
<td>Learn (by using)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take action</td>
<td>Habits (How will you sustain your success?)</td>
<td>Modeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seize success</td>
<td></td>
<td>Checklists</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improve</td>
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<td>Direction</td>
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<td>Process</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improvements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kee et al., 2010</td>
<td>Campbell &amp; van Nieuwerburgh, 2018</td>
<td>Knight, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developing Trusting Relationships

Developing trusting relationships is the cornerstone of coaching when two people engage in open dialogue and reflection in a safe environment. One of the earliest studies of principal development through coaching, Bloom et al. (2005) states that “in order to make coaching possible and to support a principal through the process, a coach must, at a minimum, have a trusting relationship with the coachee—one firmly grounded in the commitment to help the principal coachee achieve his or her goals” (p. 26). Bloom et al. also emphasize that trust is “consciously and consistently nurtured” (p. 27).

Since Bloom et al. (2005), coaching experts have defined competencies which help to develop trusting relationships. Knight (2018) couches their instructional coaching model in seven partnership principles—equity, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity. In other words, the coach and the coachee develop a “partnership” where learning can happen. Knight goes on to explain:
When coaches act in ways that are consistent with the Partnership Principles, as opposed to a top-down approach, teachers do most of the thinking, and coaches and teachers work as equals with the goal of making a powerful, positive difference in children’s lives. (p. 4)

Although Knight’s model is directed at coaching teachers, it can be argued that adhering to the partnership principles in coaching any adult would result in relationships built on trust that are also focused on the learner’s goals. Aguilar’s (2017) transformational coaching model focuses on exploring the behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being that unveil the reality behind actions and thoughts. Without developing a trusting relationship, these conversations would not exhibit the vulnerability needed to analyze data. In the *National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching* (CUREE, 2010) researchers describe it as “developing trust, attending respectfully and with sensitivity to the powerful emotions involved in deep professional learning” (p. 2).

When there is a power differential between coach and coachee, even more intentionality in developing relationships of trust is needed. Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018) warn against the subtle traps into which coaches and coachees may fall. “For the coachee,” they describe, “these traps include mistrust, looking for assurance, and dependency. For the coach, the traps include advising, accepting the dependency, or inappropriately giving support” (p.17). Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018) then suggest strategies such as acknowledging the hierarchical differences, active listening, establishing confidentiality, and asking for feedback about the coaching conversations.

Similarly, leadership coaching, like instructional or transformational coaching, relies on establishing a relationship of trust based on clearly defined roles, expectations, responsibilities, norms, and agreements (Wise & Hammack, 2011). Huff et al. (2013) home in on particular
capacities of communication needed to develop relationships. In their five-phase model of coaching, “groundwork” begins the necessary work of building relationships needed for collaboration based on active listening and asking questions. Kee et al. (2010) emphasize in their results coaching model that trust is developed through confidentiality and the coaching code of ethics. In summary, leadership coaching has the added hierarchical complexity when principals are being coached by a supervisor; therefore, more attention must be given to mindfully develop the relationships of trust needed to have meaningful coaching conversations.

**Applying Adult Learning Theory**

The basis for adult learning theory is to give adults the autonomy to make decisions about how to direct their own learning and decide for themselves what to focus on by identifying their personal or their organization’s goals. In a study done by Zepeda et al. (2014) nearly 40 years after Knowles’ seminal publication, they found that although professional development for principles was focused on goals and problems, the relevance to the individual was rarely considered. Coaching models, on the other hand, place the coachee in the key position of developing goals with a coach to facilitate their thinking. Coaching positioning is an intentional skill developed by a coach whereby relationships are strengthened. Bloom et al. (2005) described the art of moving between facilitative and instructional approaches like a Mobius strip whereby there is fluidity between “ways of being” and “ways of doing” as a coach employs consulting, collaborative, and transformational approaches. In other words, the coach develops skills to assess what type of coaching the coachee needs. Knight (2018) uses the terms facilitative (sounding board), directive (expert-apprentice), and dialogical (partner) to explain the different coaching positions.
Kee et al. (2010), in *Results Coaching*, use colored zones to represent similar concepts. To them the red zone is the directive or advice-giving zone, the yellow zone offers options, or the coach asks for permission to model the teaching, and the blue-green zone is the coaching zone (Kee et al., 2010). From a different perspective, Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018) advocate for a “coaching approach” philosophy defined as “intentionally utilizing some of the transferable elements of formal coaching a range of conversational situations that would not typically be considered coaching interactions” (p. 18). They are suggesting that leadership coaching does not always occur in a formal, one-on-one coaching conversation, but rather, it also occurs in other settings such as in groups or when spontaneous questions are asked. Because of this, the coach is required to be mindful of the potential for coaching at all times. Overall, coaching experts make it clear that coaching takes on different forms, from facilitating thinking through questioning and reflection, to more prescriptive, consultative coaching and the role of the coach is to know when a particular approach is needed.

**Coaching Language**

Coaching research also emphasizes intentional coaching language and listening development. Coaching language, including feedback, is also used to develop relationships of trust. “Coaching happens in conversation. This is when the coach artfully employs a set of strategies to prompt learning” (Aguilar, 2017, p. 34). In the *National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching* (CUREE, 2010), researchers emphasized the use of open questions for the purpose of reflection, as well as active listening as skills that mentors, specialist coaches, and co-coaches must develop. In the study by Wise and Hammack (2011), they developed the Leadership Coaching Competencies Inventory based on the three areas of building relationships, communicating effectively, and facilitating learning and performance. Of the three areas,
effective communication was perceived by principals to be the strategy that their leadership coaches used that had the most influence on their own growth. Feedback, in particular, is more effective if a coach has developed communication skills. This involves setting up the environment where those being coached can best be receptive and reflective to the feedback delivered. Campbell and van Nieuwerburgh (2018) stress in their GROWTH model the importance of language that is “affirming” where specific feedback on impact is joined with the professional goals of the learner. Specifically, this begins with building trust followed by being present, listening actively, clarifying, empathizing, being succinct, asking the best questions, and giving feedback.

**Professional Development Research**

Nearly 30 years after Joyce and Showers’ (1988) pathbreaking study, researchers at the Learning Policy Institute set out to determine what effective professional development looks like. The researchers analyzed 35 studies from the previous three decades that met their criteria and coded them to uncover the elements of effective professional development. The resulting seven characteristics include: (a) being content focused on specific curriculum or pedagogy development, (b) participants learning through active engagement which mimics student engagement for learning, (c) collaboration among participants for the sharing of ideas, (d) the use of models and modeling of instruction, (d) the utilization of a coach for expert support, (e) time for participants to reflect and receive feedback, and (f) the commitment to the time needed to practice and implement new learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

It stands to reason that teacher professional development and principal professional development both employ similar effective practices. In a study of professional development for principals, the Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) findings were prevalent. Zepeda et al. (2014)
found that throughout the four districts they studied, job-embedded training was more relevant and action-based for the principals who participated, as opposed to traditional “sit and get” model. Furthermore, the professional development Zepeda et al. studied was “ongoing, data informed, job embedded and strategic, asserting that only professional development possessing all these characteristics was effective and valuable” (2014, p. 309). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and the Zepeda et al. (2014) come to similar conclusions. If the adults, whether teachers or principals, begin with a research-based focus, are given time to apply their new skills and knowledge to their real settings, and practice these skills over time, the transfer of skill into their everyday work is more likely to occur. Both group of researchers also included that a coach or mentor facilitate ongoing support through reflection and feedback rather than relying on a one-on-one professional development format opportunity.

A key aspect shared by all professional development models is the underlying theory of adult learning and andragogy. Zepeda et al. (2014) found that the adult learning characteristic of being focused on a relevant, goal-oriented problem along with the motivation to achieve said goal was present in every district they evaluated for the study; however, the characteristic of being self-directed was not usually present. The use of a coach has implications for self-directed learning. Models of coaching often start with the goal of the learner (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Kee et al., 2010; Knight, 2018). According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Zepeda et al. (2014), these goals must be relevant, or research based. The aspect of the learner identifying the goal for themselves is a more powerful learning model according to adult learning theory. In the National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching, the coach position is for “reinforcing learners’ control over their learning” and to “clarify learning goals” (CUREE, 2010, p. 3). The coach is integral in facilitating the learner through evaluating and
refining their own goal. In conclusion, it is clear that adults learn best when they have the autonomy to identify and plan for their own goals; however, practice does not often reflect this understanding.

**Organizational Support Structures**

Schools and the principals who lead them are part of larger district organizations and are thereby reliant on support from those outside the school to provide resources, counsel, and coaching. Honig et al. (2010) confirmed previous research that in order for district-wide teaching and learning improvements to take place, there needed to be a system-wide support structure for schools. Furthermore, they suggested districts assign central office leaders as full-time supports for principals, host training with the central office leaders to increase their own skills to better support principals, establish a district-wide vision for supporting principals in all departments, and maintain ongoing efforts to evaluate and improve the practices of central office support systems (Honig et al., 2010). Their report sets the stage for a system-wide transformation that is focused on instructional leadership.

More recently, the attention of researchers has narrowed to the principal supervisor as the main, district-level support for principals. Making shifts in the principal supervisor role requires a redefining of the organization. In the *Principal Supervisor Professional Standards* (NPBEA, 2015), the authors recognized the need to shift the duties of the principal supervisor from the manager of policies and regulations to that of a coach. In fact, four of the eight standards focus on supporting the development of the principal’s educational leadership. Specifically, the standards advocate for more of the principal supervisor’s time to be spent in coaching, using evidence and evaluation for the purpose of increasing principal growth. In a parallel timeline to the development of the principal supervisor standards, researchers at the Wallace Foundation
undertook a four-year study in six urban school districts. In the PSI, the core components
detailed by the researchers include (a) revising the principal supervisor job description, (b)
reducing the principal supervisor’s span of control, (c) training supervisors and developing their
capacity to support principals, (d) developing a system for identifying and training new
supervisors, and (e) strengthening central office structures to support and sustain changes in the
principal supervisor’s role (Goldring, Clark et al., 2020; Goldring et al., 2018; Goldring, Rogers,
& Clark, 2020). The researchers behind the PSI use that report to describe the practices behind
the theory found within the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards (CCSSO, 2015),
and initiated this new way of viewing and using principal supervisors. Without question, there is
a push to make principal supervisors more responsible for the support of principal development.

One way to evaluate an organization is to study how much time a principal supervisor
spends on instructional learning issues compared to other, management related duties. Goldring
et al. (2018) noted that the role of the of principal supervisor before the PSI was largely
consumed by compliance, operational issues, discipline, complaints, budgets, etc.; by the end of
the PSI study, however, an average of 54% of the supervisors’ time was spent engaging in
instructional leadership with the principals and only 19% on operations. The time in schools
hadn’t dramatically increased but the discussions were more centered around instruction.
Similarly, Honig and Rainey (2019) reported a need for the role of the principal supervisor to
shift to coaching in order to better encourage principals to have a more teaching and learning
focus rather than hire external coaches for principals to try and have a similar effect.
Furthermore, district-level supervisors of the principal supervisors in the district, supported this
shift by spending more of their own time helping principal supervisors with teaching and
learning matters.
Another way to structurally change an organization so as to support principals as instructional leaders is to evaluate how many principals each principal supervisor oversees. A few studies have looked specifically at this span of control that principal supervisors given as their responsibility. In order to become more instructionally focused, the authors of the PSI recommend that the span of control be reduced (Goldring et al., 2018). Cochran et al. (2020) conducted a six-year, longitudinal study of the role of the principal supervisor. Using extensive surveys of principal supervisors across many districts in 2012 and 2018, the average number of principals a principal supervisor was responsible for supported decreased from 24 to 16 allowing instructional discussions with principals to increase significantly. As a result of this decrease, 98-99% of respondents reported having more discussions around instructional issues, classroom visits, student performance data, and principal and teacher performance. Reducing the span of control of principal supervisors was identified as one of the first steps to changing the principal supervisor role. Goldring et al. (2018) found that in the pre-study, the principal-to-principal supervisor ratio was 17:1 and was then reduced to 12:1 by the end of the study. Through these reductions, principal supervisors are in a better position to support principals as instructional leaders.

Principal Supervisor as Evaluator and Coach

In recent studies, many researchers have taken the position that principal supervisors can be both an evaluator and a coach (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Goldring et al., 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020). As principal supervisor positions move toward more of a coaching role, the need to balance evaluation and coaching duties needs to be a consideration of districts. Although principal supervisors might find it challenging to balance the role of coach and evaluator, but in some recent studies, researchers are encouraging that both roles can be
successfully executed by the same person. In the *Guide to Coaching School Principals in Minnesota* (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016), the researchers recognize the need for both supervisory responsibilities and coaching support by stating that,

> When district leaders are able to establish relationships with school principals based on trust and a shared commitment to professional growth, the evaluation process will have the greatest possible impact on principal practice, school systems and structures, school-based programs, and student supports (p. 6).

The vision for Minnesota’s evaluation process is to leverage the coaching relationships established between supervisors and principals. In the Wallace Foundation study, Goldring et al. (2018) saw that the increased contact through coaching was a benefit to the evaluation process as it built trust between the coach and coachee, but also allowed for ongoing feedback. In another study, a principal described their changed perception of their principal supervisor as they accepted losing some autonomy in order to gain increased support through ongoing coaching that didn’t feel evaluative (Saltzman, 2016). Overall, researchers are beginning to see how supervisors could also act as coaches when relationships are built on trust.

**Widening District Office Support Structures**

In another area of study, researchers consider how all, central office staff support the principal. The leaders of districts evaluated during the PSI undertook reorganizing their central office by reallocating non-managerial responsibilities away from principal supervisors, developing collaboration and coordination across departments, establishing support teams, and improving overall communication systems (Goldring et al., 2018). This change in structure isn’t always as coordinated as and could result in unintended frustration. For instance, one study uncovered conflict when others besides the principal supervisor are involved in supporting the
principal. Cochran et al. (2020) showed that 38% of the time, principal supervisors perceive other, central office staff as interferences with their principal supervisor work; 55% of the time, central office staff members are deployed to schools without their knowledge, and that 60% of the time, principals lose time because of central office requests (Cochran et al., 2020). Overall, intentional structure changes are needed to widen the support systems but also those changes must be scrutinized to ensure there is a better coordination between all, district-level personnel.

Realignment of Duties

As districts evaluate support systems for principals, they might consider the duties assigned to other district leaders as well. The specialized expertise of other district leaders might also prove to be valuable in guiding principals in their particular instructional goals. One of the components of the PSI model is to strengthen other district office structures in order to support the new, coaching role of principal supervisors. Specifically, Goldring et al. (2018) suggested that district leaders improve their communication by opening up direct lines to representatives from various departments, thus allowing principals to bypass their supervisor on matters that do not entail instructional issues. In their report, Honig et al. (2010) suggests that “for [district leaders] used to overseeing a management structure devoted to oversight of busses, budgets, and buildings, redefining the focus around the core work of improving teaching and learning will likely feel very new and very different” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 120–121). In order to tackle competing demands, they suggest “intentional efforts of central office administrators . . . to remove responsibilities or tasks that would make it harder for [Instructional Leadership Directors] to maximize the time they spend helping principals exercise instructional leadership” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 61). In both of these reports, researchers detail how district priorities
should be set, those who are directly supporting the principal directly should have their duties realigned and for other central office staff to take up the managerial responsibilities.

**Pipelines**

The fourth and fifth core components of the PSI include developing systems to identify and train new supervisors and strengthening central office structures to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisor role (Goldring et al., 2018). The pipeline to the principal supervisor position is another area for proactively and intentionally developing the role. Cochran et al. (2020) found that only 25% of districts had a principal supervisor pipeline program and only 25% had a mentoring or induction program specifically for principal supervisors. However, the Tulsa Public School District has developed a Learning Leaders Program that specifically recruits high performing principals to their principal supervisor roles (Saltzman, 2016). As the focus turns to the increasing demand for principal supervisors to take the lead in developing the instructional leadership of principals, more research in this area will be undertaken.

**Conclusion**

The literature is limited but growing on how the principal supervisor role is changing from one focused on operational and policy compliance to the main, instructional leadership development support for principals. Even less is written on building the capacity of principal supervisors for this change in responsibility. Although much has been written on leadership coaching, far less researchers have focused on the principal supervisor as the main coach of principals. From the coaching literature, there is much to be learned about the conditions under which effective coaching thrives. As district leaders take on this shift, more will be learned about how supervisors balance evaluating and coaching their principals. Overall, supporting principals more fully in their ever-expanding number of duties is an area worthy of continual study.
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APPENDIX B

Extended Methodology

Problem Statement

The role of the principal supervisor has undergone a transformation from manager to instructional leader. Researchers for the Wallace Foundation undertook a four-year study in six urban school districts. In this Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI), the researchers set out five core components that include (a) revising the principal supervisor job description, (b) reducing the principal supervisor’s span of control, (c) training supervisors and developing their capacity to support principals, (d) developing a system for identifying and training new supervisors, and (e) strengthening central office structures to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisor’s role (Goff et al., 2015; Goldring, Clark et al., 2020; Goldring et al., 2018). Coaching literature is plentiful in the effectiveness of coaching teachers and more recently of coaching principals; however, research is lacking in both the coaching of principal supervisors and how to develop the capacity of principal supervisors to coach. In fact, few researchers outside of those behind the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards (CCSSO, 2015) and the PSI (Goldring, Clark et al., 2020; Goldring et al., 2018) address supporting and developing the principal supervisor. For this reason, research in this area is needed, especially since prior professional development research, specifically Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), and coaching research itself, beginning with Joyce and Showers (1988), point to the value of coaching. For this reason, I focused this study on the following research questions:

- What aspects of professional development did principal supervisors perceive as meaningful in developing their competencies to coach principals?
What is the experience of principals as a result of the coaching relationship with the principal supervisor and district specialist?

Participation

The large urban school district where this study takes place was undergoing discussions surrounding the new, PSI report on the principal supervisor role as it relates to instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2018). Because of the close proximity and relationship between them and my district, it was made known to me that discussions and plans were being made for coaching principals. My literature review on coaching had yielded many studies on coaching teachers but very little on coaching principals. Even more lacking were studies on developing coaches for principals. For this reason, I approached some of the individuals in the participating district to see if they would be willing to be part of a study related to their new initiative. This study is unique in nature because it is the story of one district’s journey to develop a system of support for their principals through coaching. It is also relevant because of the lack of research in this area. This study provided an opportunity that other researchers have yet to explore.

The organizational structure of this district entails principal supervisors being assigned to a region. There are five elementary and three secondary principal supervisors who oversee 60 elementary schools, 13 jr. high schools, and 10 high schools. Departments are organized by job assignments. The curriculum department consists of 11 administrators which consist of some former principals.

All three secondary principal supervisors agreed to participate in this study. Because they had already begun the work of self-conceptualizing a coaching model for principals, they were interested in trying it out. Although they all recognized they did not have everything in place, they were vulnerable enough to allow an outsider to be a witness to their journey. My
recruitment of these individuals included providing them with the research questions, study design, and key research that had informed the design. I also studied the research their district team was reading in order to better understand the backstory that had led the leaders of this district to try coaching their principals.

Secondary principals were selected by the principal supervisors who oversee them. Principal supervisors made these selections based on individual criteria that consisted of how much time the principal would have to be coached, whether the principal was “coachable,” the relationship the principal supervisor had with the principal, and/or the principal having a vision for learning. The result was names of principals who all were at the junior high level. Out of the eight names of principal given, seven responded to my request to be part of the study and six completed both interviews. From the seven who were interviewed, three were from one principal supervisor, and two each from the other two principal supervisors.

The six district specialists that took part in the study were all part of the curriculum department. Two of these individuals have never been a principal and had only teaching experience—one in elementary and one in secondary. Three have been elementary principals for the district. The last district specialist was a former secondary principal prior to working in the curriculum department. This individual was my initial contact for the study and was instrumental in setting up meetings with the rest of the curriculum team who were part of the principal coaching plan development. Of these six individuals, the two with secondary experience were assigned to the principal supervisors to coach in dyad teams. In other words, one principal supervisor and one curriculum district specialist would meet with an individual principal or a group of principals, together.
Overall, convenience sampling was utilized for this study. It was the authentic development of a principal coaching model that outweighed any other sampling factor. For this reason, there were little differences or consideration of gender, age, race, or experience in the position except in terms of analyzing data to uncover any potential relationships in the findings.

**Measurement**

Based on the research questions of this study and the nature of discovering individual perspectives on coaching, qualitative interviews were the logical method to pursue. Interviews were conducted at the beginning and end of the study and spanned one school year. Pre- and post-interviews were used because of the nature of the model the district had developed, making it likely that intermediate interviews would not result in any new insights that the post-interview would fail to provide. Centering the interview questions around the research questions, I designed interview instruments that were specific to either principals or principal supervisors and district specialists. The semi-structured interview questions for both the pre- and post-interviews of both positions can be found in Appendix E.

**Data Collection**

The pre-interviews were conducted at the beginning of the school year and took approximately 15 minutes to administer. I asked for demographic and experience information to possibly establish differences between participants. Furthermore, perception of coaching as well as what expectations there were for the upcoming coaching experience gave a baseline for coaching mindset and understanding of coaching. Principal supervisors, district specialists, and principals were asked mostly the same general questions. The coaches in the study (principal supervisors and district specialists) were asked more specific questions based on the selections of who to coach and on the individuals’ perceptions on coaching versus evaluation.
After the first interviews were coded, I revised the first version of the post-interview questions based on the data gathered in the first interview. For principals, questions largely entailed their coaching experience, including the relationship between them and their coaches. The addition of next-step questions was added as well as the general open-ended question to solicit any comment concerning the experience. For principal supervisors and district specialists, much of the intended questions were changed. This was due to the fact that formal professional development was not part of their training; therefore, more emphasis was placed on the next steps in their own coaching skill development. Finally, the coaches were asked about how coaching influences other aspects of their job in order to see what individuals found valuable and transferable in coaching. Post-interviews lasted between 15 minutes for most principals to 40 minutes for principal supervisors and district specialists. These interviews were conducted at the end of the school year in May and June.

Interviews were conducted individually over a recorded Zoom session (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2021). Simultaneously, the Otter app (Otter.ai, 2021) was used to record and transcribe the interviews. Consent forms were collected from each participant as well as verbal permission to record on both platforms at the beginning of each session (see Appendix D). After each interview, a cleaning of the transcription included assigning speakers and verifying the transcribed dialogue to the audio recording. The video and audio recordings were consulted for accuracy and context checking.

Throughout the study, I took field notes on my correspondences with participants, discussions with my chair, and any meetings held. As changes occurred in the study, field notes served as an outline of events. A core group of district supervisors were my main contact throughout the study. They served to not only contextualize district processes, but also served as
a validity standard for checking my understanding of their process. Zoom meetings with this
group were set up three times during the course of the study (Zoom Video Communications, Inc.,
2021). Meetings included preliminary findings of the first interview, plans for professional
learning and district structural changes, and questions for me on coaching in general. I also used
these meetings to gauge when would be the most appropriate time to conduct the post-interview.

Coding and Analysis

All interviews were uploaded to the NVivo 12 qualitative data platform (QSR
International Pty Ltd., 2018). Each file was organized by interview (pre and post) as well as by
job description (principal supervisor, district specialist, and principal) which served as the only
attribute coding because all participants except one were similar in age, gender, and racial
background. I used both deductive and inductive coding for initial coding methods. Deductive
provisional codes included seven characteristics of the professional learning framework
(Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) and the coaching principles (Bloom et al., 2005; Campbell &
van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Kee et al., 2010; Knight, 2018). Specifically, in vivo coding was used
to capture the participant’s voice in order to uncover their perceptions.

Second coding included reclassification of nodes and child nodes in terms of focused
coding. I used this to determine major themes. In this way, major themes were broken down to
identify subthemes or categories, focusing attention directly in one area. This expansion of codes
allowed for analysis and determination to define themes more accurately. Nodes were then
combined or collapsed as necessary.

Axial coding was then used to discover relationships. I ran queries to determine if the
three different groups of participants were valuing or referring more to one theme and to link
nodes to determine if a relationship existed.
Major findings were uncovered through analyzing how often participants referred to the separate themes. This was also sorted by participant group in case one group was more likely to identify with a particular node or category than another. In most cases, there was not a discrepancy and response frequencies were combined. A percentage was then calculated based on the number of participants who contributed to each theme. Primary finding thresholds were determined at 85-100% and secondary findings were between 65-84%. Another strategy in post-coding consisted of conducting a trinity analysis whereby major themes were conceptualized through a triple Venn diagram (see Figure 5).

Analysis consisted of pairing themes in a query as bivariates in order to determine if there was a relationship. Both primary and secondary themes were paired. From the results, common thoughts were charted. Findings and analysis processes were charted using Google Sheets (Google, n.d.). The most prominent relationships, represented by the number of references, are found in Figure 5 and Table 3.

**Figure B1**

*Triple Venn Diagram of Conceptualized Themes*
### Table B2

**Bivariate Analysis of Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIVARIATES</th>
<th># PAIRINGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Positioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing of Professional Goals</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking Questions</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships of Professional Trust</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for Coaching</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Focus</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Structure</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Prof. Goals</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Focused</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach &amp; Expert Support</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Focused Goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships of Professional Trust</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs/Wants with Coach</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Goals</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for Coaching</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision for Coaching</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships of Professional Trust</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Saldana (Saldana, 2016) was used as a reference for all qualitative coding processes.

**Validity**

Internal validity for this study was obtained through triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement, peer review, and reflexivity as outlined in *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation was obtained through interviewing different perspectives—principal supervisors, district specialists, and principals. Of those, 15 of the 16 individuals were interviewed twice and questions built upon themselves to more deeply understand their experience. The participation in the study was based on all those who were engaged in coaching principals and the principals the coaches selected to be coached. For this reason, there was not a limiting or sampling of the population but instead was all
inclusive. Member checks were conducted with a group of four lead participants throughout the study which contextualized their journey. In the last member check meeting, the conceptual coaching model was discussed as were the findings of the study.

Because of my understanding of coaching and professional learning research as well as my experience with coaching and training coaches, as a researcher I was cognizant of the influence I might have on the gathering of data and the resulting findings. My expectation going into this study was that formal coaching training was essential for coaching implementation to occur; however, quite the opposite was the result. Despite the lack of training, not only were participants eager to engage in coaching, but they were also reflective and able to identify for themselves where they needed skill development. The findings of the importance of relationships, the focus on goals, and the reliance on models and experts were expected; however, the insights on the role a coach has of questioning and positioning as well as how powerful being a self-directed adult learner were not initially anticipated. For these reasons, the study stands on its own and has not been influenced by me as the researcher.

Conclusion

Overall, research on coaching training at upper district levels is lacking. This study was not meant to generalize but to inform readers. Other district leaders could use the participating district’s journey as a source of reference as they develop their own programs for coaching their principals. They could also find insight on how duties are assigned to district-level principal supervisors and other district leaders, including the assignments of coaching principals and the time to implement this meaningfully. To be sure, this was one district’s approach and each organization interested in coaching principals will need to contextualize coaching in their own way.
References


QSR International Pty Ltd. (2018). NVivo (Version 12) [computer software].


Zoom Video Communications, Inc. (2021). Zoom Meetings (Version 5.7.1) [Computer software].

https://zoom.us/
APPENDIX C

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Memorandum

To: Sterling Hilton, Ph.D.
Department: BYU - EDUC - Educational Leadership & Foundations
From: Sandra Alma, MPA, HRPP Manager
Wayne Larsen, M.Acc., IRB Administrator
Bob Ridge, Ph.D., IRB Chair
Date: September 10, 2020
IRB#: IRB2020-375
Title: Principles of Coaching to Coaching of Principals

Brigham Young University’s IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as exempt level, Category 2. This study does not require an annual continuing review. Each year near the anniversary of the approval date, you will receive an email reminding you of your obligations as a researcher and to check on the status of the study. You will receive this email each year until you close the study.

The study is approved as of 09/18/2020. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB.

Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement can be found in IRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, report adverse events, can be found on the IRB website. IRIS guide: http://orca.byu.edu/irb/iris/story_hbms.html
5. All non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some
Memorandum

To: Sterling Hilton  
Department: BYU - EDUC - Educational Leadership & Foundations  
From: Sandee Anna, MPA, IRPP Associate Director  
Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator  
Bob Ridge, Ph.D., IRB Chair  

Date: December 04, 2020  
IRB#: IRB2020-375  
Title: Principles of Coaching to Coaching of Principals

Brigham Young University’s IRB has reviewed the amendment submitted to increase the study participants to include elementary principal supervisors, elementary district specialists, and elementary principals. The IRB determined that the amendment does not increase risks to the research subject and the aims of the study remain as originally approved. The amendment has been approved. The revised consent statement and recruiting script have been approved and stamped for your files.

The approval of this protocol expires on 09/17/2021. All conditions for a continued approval period remain in effect. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
APPENDIX D

Consent Form

Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction
This research study is being conducted by Suzanne Kimball, doctoral student, and Dr. Sterling Hilton at Brigham Young University to describe the experiences (both benefits and challenges) of secondary principal supervisor and district specialists' participation in coaching professional development as well as the experiences of principals who are being coached by principal supervisors and district specialists. You are invited to participate because you are participating in this professional development or coaching within your school district.

Procedures
If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- you will be interviewed for approximately twenty (20) minutes two times and once for forty-five (45) minutes about your experiences in professional development, coaching, or being coached.
- the interview will be audio and video recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements
- the interview will take place using videoconferencing at a date and time that is convenient for you
- the researcher may contact you later to clarify your interview answers for approximately fifteen (15) minutes.
- total time commitment should be between 85-100 minutes

Risks/Discomforts
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study. It is possible that you might feel some discomfort as you discuss challenges you have experienced in the professional development or coaching sessions; however, any level of discomfort should be minimal and of short duration.

Benefits
There will be no direct benefits to you. It is hoped, however, that through your participation researchers may learn how coaching could contribute to the development of leaders within your district and others and may inform school district leaders regarding meaningful approaches for enlarging the capacities of district and school leaders.

Confidentiality
Researchers will maintain the confidentiality of the research participants. The research data will be kept on password protected computers with backup files stored on the cloud with restricted permissions. Only the researchers will have access to the data. Individual statements from the interviews will only be used for illustrative purposes in research presentations and papers, and individuals will never be identified. At the conclusion of the study, the audio and video recorded interviews will be deleted, all identifying information will be removed from the transcribed interviews, and the data will be kept in the researcher's secured electronic files.

Participation
Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy of any kind.

Compensation
There is no payment or reimbursement for participating in this study.

Questions about the Research
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Suzanne Kimball at (801) 369-3473 for further information.

Questions about Your Rights as Research Participants
If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant contact IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461; A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu.
Statement of Consent

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name (Printed): ___________________________ Signature ___________________________ Date: ___________
# APPENDIX E

## Interview Instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principals</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Coaching Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age, gender, ethnicity</td>
<td>Tell me about your experience being coached by your principal supervisor? By the district specialists? Together?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience as a principal</td>
<td>○ How often?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is your personal experience with coaching?</td>
<td>○ How long?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is your perception of coaching?</td>
<td>What problems are you solving with your PS/DS through coaching? What goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What isn’t coaching?</td>
<td>What have you found to be beneficial in coaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are you hoping will be gained by being coached?</td>
<td>As you have solved these problems, have you developed any new capacities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are you nervous about?</td>
<td>○ How has coaching influenced other duties as a principal? (conversations/interactions with teachers, MVVG--mentioned?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you engage in coaching conversations with teachers? If so, what do they look like?</td>
<td>○ How was principal autonomy developed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coaching Experience</td>
<td>Have you experienced any challenges during the coaching?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How are your conversations with your PS different from those in previous years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How are your conversations different with the DS different from those in previous years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ What is your relationship with your coaches?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ What is your perception of the relationship between the coaches?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Was one of your coaches more effective?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Can a principal supervisor be both an evaluator and a coach?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Next Steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Would you want to continue being coached? By your PS? By your DS?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Would you want to choose your coach?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Who would you like to coach you?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ What do you need moving forward--what could improve this experience for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Is there anything else that you would like to comment on that I haven’t asked?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Supervisors &amp; District Specialists</td>
<td>Pre-Interview</td>
<td>Post-Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Age, gender, ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Experiential information (experience as a teacher, teacher leadership roles, principal—years and location, experience as a district leader—years and positions)</td>
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<tr>
<td>● What is your personal experience with coaching? (being coached, being a coach)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Which principals are you selecting to coach?</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● How did you select the principals? Why did you select them?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Development</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What are you hoping to gain from coaching training?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What is your definition of coaching?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What is the difference between coaching and mentoring?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coaching &amp; Evaluation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● How do you currently approach evaluation of your principals?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● How do you see coaching and evaluation similar/dissimilar?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coaching Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Why coach? What is coaching?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Describe a typical coaching encounter. (How often did you coach?)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● How was it decided what to talk about during the coaching session?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>● How is that different from conversations you have had in the past?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Tell about a successful coaching experience. How do you know it was successful?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What was most challenging about coaching principals?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Describe your current coaching practice (including how PS and district specialists coached together/separately, talked about coaching, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● What were the positive aspects of your particular relationship? What were the challenges?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Development</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Describe your coaching training to date? (How often did you meet to talk about coaching/PD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Which coaching strategies were the most beneficial for your development?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What feedback was given and received pertaining to your PD? Was there a structure in place for you as a coach?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● What do you think you would need to help you to coach? What was missing from the PD?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Coaching Impact</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● How has your coaching experience influenced how you approached other district responsibilities?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>