

An Inquiry into the Influence of Stress on New School Leaders within a Unique Mentorship Experience

Jodie Rommel, *Thompson School District*
Donna Cooner, *Colorado State University*

Abstract

This study aimed to identify the sources of stress new school leaders encounter that may influence their mental health. This study used semi-structured focus groups to elicit thick, rich descriptions of participants' experiences. The extensive data sets were collected over two years from 16 focus group interviews conducted during Colorado State University School Leadership Institute retreats. Narrative analysis of participants' responses provided findings on the stress they experienced, including fear of failure or insecurity, pressure to perform, isolation, work-life balance, time constraints, and compassion fatigue. The participants identified that this unique mentorship opportunity allowed for self-reflection, self-care, and reconnecting with their purpose; furthermore, participants shared that the School Leadership Institute offered support and connectedness in a safe, non-evaluative environment. They shared the importance of strong building-level team support, the cathartic nature of the focus group interviews, and the positive progression from year to year in their roles.

Keywords: New school leaders; Stress; Mentorship

Jodie Rommel & Donna Cooner. (2020). An Inquiry into the Influence of Stress on New School Leaders within a Unique Mentorship Experience. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 16(17). <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/1013> doi: 10.22230/ijepl.2020v16n17a1013

IJEPL is a joint publication of **PKD International**, the Faculty of Education at **Simon Fraser University**, the College of Education and Human Development at **George Mason University**, and the **University of Delaware**. By virtue of their appearance in this open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings 90 days after initial publication. Copyright for articles published in IJEPL is retained by the authors. More information is available on the IJEPL website: <http://www.ijepl.org>



*When you ask what I need . . . that was like an awakening for me.
It was meeting with people that are dealing with the same stuff outside
of my building who I can be honest and straightforward with . . .
because sometimes it's just so isolating.*
—Tyler, second-year school administrator

Introduction

New school leaders are under pressure to perform immediately, despite receiving little to no support as new administrators. According to an emerging body of research, school leadership is second only to teaching as it relates to impact on student learning; therefore, the retention of high-quality school leaders is a high-stakes endeavor. Unfortunately, according to JoAnn Bartoletti and Gail Connelly (2013), principal development remains a low priority in most educational policy agendas. Even districts actively offering their new school leaders support are not meeting the needs of those immersed in this dynamic and demanding profession. As Susan Szachowicz and Sharon Wolder (2014) explained, “Every new principal needs a trusted colleague, friend, mentor, or confidant who can provide sage advice, listen to occasional venting, offer unwavering support, and most important, bring laughter to the situation” (p. 2). On this basis, this article presents findings from a study that examined the sources of stress and alternative mentorship possibilities for new leaders.

Statement of the problem

Due to the dynamic and ever-changing role of school leaders, university faculty often receive feedback from the field that preparation programs are not applicable or relevant. According to Lee Mitgang and Jennifer Gill (2012), “Aspiring principals need pre-service training that prepares them to lead improved instruction and school change, not just manage buildings” (p. 2). The Wallace Foundation’s multiyear, multisite study (Turnbull, Anderson, Riley, MacFarlane, & Aladjem, 2016) identified four interrelated necessary components of policy and practice for preparing high-quality school principals:

- standards that specify what principals need to know and do, which undergird principal training, hiring, and on-the-job evaluation and support;
- stronger pre-service training;
- more selective and rigorous hiring procedures; and
- on-the-job evaluation and support designed to help novice principals perform well, especially in improving instruction (p. i).

After seeing graduates from a university principal licensure program struggle without support from their school districts, a team of researchers decided to pilot a study at Colorado State University’s School Leadership Institute to gather important information about what graduates identified as needs during the principal licensure program and what they identified as needs after they were in a leadership role. The research team was well aware that school districts provided mentorship focused on topics such as a) how to improve student achievement scores, b) how to be effective instructional leaders, and c) how to create optimal schedules. However, they saw a huge gap in mentorship programs addressing the day-to-day challenges new school

leaders faced, the impact on them personally, and how this influenced their longevity in the field. Principal preparation faculty noticed a lack of curriculum focused on the internalized pressures and needs of individuals in district-level mentorship structures. This study addresses the need for mentorship programs to go beyond the typical opportunities and address the whole person, including their sources of stress and well-being.

The overall intent of this study was to provide the opportunity for new school leaders to communicate what challenged them the most in their roles and what supports or structures they needed to be successful in order to remain in this profession. Through participant experiences, data collection via semi-structured focus groups, and data analysis, this study offers some insight to universities and school districts based directly on feedback from new school leaders about what challenged them and what they needed.

The following research questions guided the study:

- What do new school leaders identify as their sources of stress, and what influence do these have on their mental health in their first three years in a new leadership role after completing a principal licensure program?
- What do new school leaders need to thrive and remain in their leadership roles?

During the focus groups, participants identified challenges and stressors in the field. Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) provided a widely used definition of stressful situations as “one in which the demands of the situation threaten to exceed the resources of the individual” (p. 628). Tom Cox and Amanda Griffiths (2010) discussed how transaction stress theory proposes that the different levels and duration of stress response an individual experiences is dependent on the individual’s environmental factors and ability to cope with the stressor. New school leaders in this study expressed multiple scenarios that induced stress in their lives. Although some participants had similar experiences, the degree of stress and how it influenced them varied based on their unique situation, their support systems, and their individual coping skills. Lori Boyland (2011) reported that the principalship has become even more challenging, characterizing it as a culture of stress for principals that requires longer hours to meet the demands of rising accountability standards.

New school leaders frequently face novel situations that fall outside of their principal licensure training. Szachowicz and Wolder (2014) described how their principal training covered how to handle some of the most challenging and overwhelming scenarios; however, much of the practical instruction on fielding immediate challenges was missing. Frequently, the participants in this study described how there was no playbook for navigating all the novel situations they encountered during their first year in school administration. Boyland (2011) stated that there is a point for an individual when demands outweigh coping skills and it results in stress. In addition, Don Colbert (2008) described how some levels of stress are not harmful and are a normal part of life; however, high levels of ongoing stress can lead to the excessive release of stress hormones that lead to chronic stress. Colbert (2008) explained how unmanaged excessive stress can lead to mental health problems. In their research, Barbara Brock and Marilyn Grady (2002) found that the high inci-

dences of exhaustion and stress associated with the principalship resulted in reduced mental and physical stamina among practitioners. Participants in this study reported weight gain, health issues, and strain in their personal relationships due to the stress and demands of their jobs.

Other participants struggled a great deal with feelings of isolation, confirming John Holloway's (2004) finding that a sense of isolation is the most influential source of stress on new school leaders. Molly Howard and Barbara Mallory (2008) explained that the paradoxical nature of the principal role is that it requires interaction with people most of the day, and yet it is truly lonesome at the top. Another prominent concern among the participants in this study was their fear of meeting expectations and retaining their jobs. A study by Olusegun Sogunro (2012) conducted in Connecticut over two and a half years with 52 principals found that more than 96 percent claimed to have experienced work-related stress at a level they believed was affecting their mental and physical health. They indicated fear of failure as one of the seven factors contributing to their stress, and all of the participants described work-life balance struggles. Boyland's study (2011) depicted how principals' responsibilities consume their family and recreation time. For some participants in this study, compassion fatigue or the cost of caring for others was their paramount stressor. Thomas Skovholt and Michelle Trotter-Mathison (2016) stated,

Working in the helping professions means making highly skilled professional attachments, involvement, and separations over and over again with one person after another. The difficulty of the work relates to our hope to make a difference, with our inability to tolerate so much ambiguity, with the distress we vicariously feel from those we attempt to assist. (p. 86)

According to James Doud and Edward Keller (1998), there is a 42 percent turnover rate among elementary and middle school principals. Many states have recognized this problematic statistic and created mentorship programs in the hope of addressing it. In 2007, Christine Devita (2010), the former president of the Wallace Foundation, set out to better understand the recent spread of mentoring programs for new school leaders. She reviewed literature, interviewed leading experts, and conducted site visits in two school districts, finding a growing recognition of the need to put additional thought, energy, and resources into the ongoing training and preparation of new school leaders. Devita (2010) also concluded that many, if not all, of the existing mentoring programs were falling short. The programs tended to be a buddy system or checklist exercise that did not truly prepare new principals. These studies on new school leadership mentoring programs identified their pitfalls and the need for highly developed programs. To this point, the School Leadership Institute's recurring retreat format and participant-focused agenda is unique compared to other mentorship programs already established across the country. Another important difference with the School Leadership Institute mentorship format is the way participants' personal perspectives guide the mentorship retreats.

Data collection

Over the course of two years, the School Leadership Institute convened for four weekends at a professional retreat. These focus group interviews were conducted

during the four weekend retreats. The research team conducted a total of 16 focus group interviews that were roughly one hour long. The participants were put into two focus groups: one with four participants and one with five. In regards to the size of the focus groups, a study by Anthony Onwuegbuzie, Wendy Dickenson, Nancy Leech, and Annmarie Zoran (2009) stated:

The rationale for this range of focus group size stems from the goal that the focus groups should include enough participants to yield diversity in information provided, yet they should not include too many participants because large groups can create an environment where participants do not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and experiences. (p. 3)

For those same factors, these researchers chose to form groups no larger than five participants. Michael Agar and James MacDonald (1995) described focus groups as a hybrid between a structured meeting and a spontaneous conversation where individuals pick up on one another's contributions. Similarly, the focus groups in this study had a flexible structure that provided participants with the space to engage in reciprocal conversations. The focus group questions asked participants to identify supports they needed in their current role as well as ways to improve the principal preparation program. All participants were asked the same questions. It is important to note that participants may have answered questions with social desirability biases, the tendency of some respondents to report an answer in a way they deem to be more socially acceptable than how they truly feel or think. The researchers ensured that each participant had the opportunity and time to answer each question. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) stated, "The progression and management of conversation is influenced by the knowledge, experiences, and discursive styles of each focus group participant and the moderator" (p. 15). The researchers deemed the retreat-based setting crucial to allow participants to concentrate on the goals of the project rather than the daily stressful demands of school leadership. The cabin was situated in the mountains where internet and cellphone service was inconsistent. This setting made it easier for participants to focus on the retreat, rather than reading work emails or text messages from family. Researchers recorded the conversations, and the recordings were professionally transcribed. The researchers then reviewed the transcriptions for any discrepancies.

Participants

The participants in this study included a convenient sample of nine school leaders who were all graduates from the same principal preparation program and were in their first three years of a new school leadership position. The participants were invited to participate in the retreat and gave written consent for the focus group interviews. The retreats were free to participants and completely voluntary. The participants worked in five different school districts across Colorado. Five participants were men and four participants were women. One female identified as a Latina. Another female identified as White and American Indian. One male identified as Latino and White. The rest of the participants identified as White. The participants were from the pool of graduates from the prior three years who were currently in administrative positions. This selection

of participants ensured representation across building levels: elementary school, middle school, high school, and district. The participant composition also ensured a variety of roles were represented: deans, assistant principals, principals, and a special education coordinator. All participants except one had been teachers. One participant was previously a social worker. The researchers developed a description of each participant, identifying some key characteristics as reported by each school leader. In a process described by Áine Humble and Elise Radina (2019) as Doucette's use of the listening guide process, participants reviewed the transcripts, attending to the diverse characteristics of each participant, and then created a narrative for each one. Pseudonyms are used in this article to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Leah

Leah taught Spanish and English language development at the middle school level for over 10 years. She then moved to a dean position, a role typically responsible for discipline, attendance, and various student-related supports, and was in her second year as assistant principal in a middle school. She reportedly was a) thriving and growing as a leader and happy in her current role; b) part of a strong, cohesive team; and c) eventually wanted a principal position.

Lilly

Lilly worked as a social worker for seven years. She was dean for three years, and all of her experience was at the same high school. She reportedly was a) part of a supportive team and b) ready for new challenge.

Jasmine

Jasmine taught two years at the middle school level, taught five years at the elementary school level/special education, and spent 16 years in administration as principal and director. However, this was her first year in a new leadership role as a coordinator of special education. She reportedly would like to pursue work in higher education as professor/researcher.

Andrea

Andrea taught for 10 years at the middle school level and was in her second year as high school assistant principal. She was reportedly a) extremely positive about her role/team, b) growing as an administrator, and c) did not talk about seeking her next role.

Tyler

Tyler taught five years at the elementary school level and was in his second year as assistant principal in the same school. He reportedly a) experienced many shifts in the leadership/structure of his team, b) did have support from district and building level, c) had a role similar to a principal role but structured differently, and d) did not talk about his next role.

David

David taught at the high school level for five years, spent one year as dean in an el-

elementary school, and then spent the next year as assistant principal in same elementary school. David was in his first year as assistant principal in a high school. He reportedly a) struggled and did not have a supportive team his first two years in leadership, b) currently had great support on his team, c) was growing as a leader, and d) desired principalship in the near future.

Ryan

Ryan taught physical education for 20 years at the high school level. He was in his second year as a dean in a middle school. He reportedly a) had struggled some with administrative team support, b) was new to the school, and c) would have liked to secure a high school assistant principal/athletic director role.

Carter

Carter taught middle school social studies for about five years, became assistant principal of a different middle school for one year, and then became principal at the same school; he was in his second year in that role. Carter reportedly a) felt he was meant for this role and was in his element, b) was growing as a leader, c) had supportive building-level and district-level teams, and d) eventually wanted to seek a superintendent position.

Kyle

Kyle taught science for 10 years and then went into a high school principal role. He was in his second year as principal. He reportedly a) did not have administration-team support in the building, and b) he was considering other opportunities and even desired to be a classroom teacher again.

During the focus groups, participants were asked the following semi-structured questions:

Now that you are two to three years into the job, what has changed and what remains the same?

What is your current understanding of the principalship?

I cannot imagine doing my work without ...?

Do you have a clear understanding now of what your purpose is?

What do you need?

What aspects of the retreat have you coming back?

What is the best piece of advice you have implemented that a mentor has given you?

Findings

After the focus group interviews were professionally transcribed, the researchers listened to the audio recordings multiple times, creating memo entries while listening. The research team read the transcripts multiple times to analyze the qualitative data. The responses to the semi-structured questions were grouped using content analysis, coded to identify general themes, and, lastly, placed into categories. Humble and Radina (2019) stated, "This approach utilizes four readings of the interview transcripts broadly framed as attending to a) reflexivity, b) narrative, c) subjectivity, and d) structuring contexts" (p. 81). Reflexivity is an attitude of attending systematically

to the construction of knowledge during the research process, especially on behalf of the researcher (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Within the context of this study, the backgrounds and positions of the researchers were important considerations that provided a richer, more developed understanding of the complex role of school leader; however, reflexivity also required the researchers to examine and consciously acknowledge the assumptions and preconceptions they brought into the research that contributed to shaping the outcome.

In the first reading of the transcripts, repetitive words and phrases, central themes, events, and key characters were identified. The researchers recognized the following repeated words:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • school | • achievement |
| • my team | • insecure |
| • making the right/wrong decision | • new |
| • not enough time | • my purpose |
| • isolation | • gratitude |
| • alone | • performance |
| • culture | • fear |
| • climate | • afraid |
| • trust | • learning |
| • relationships | • comfortable |
| • family | • uncomfortable |
| • priorities | • leadership |
| • expectations | • principal |
| • figuring it out | • not being myself/
true self |
| • confidence | • being my true self |

Next, the researchers identified a) a central story line that encompassed a group of new school leaders who gathered for a professional retreat to b) openly discuss challenges and triumphs as a means to refocus on their purpose and reflect on their practice in a safe, non-evaluative space. Then the researchers recognized the themes of this story, which included emotional and psychological components of the work: stress, the importance of relationships (e.g., family, friends, administrative teams, teachers, and mentors), time constraints, work-life balance, feelings of inadequacy/insecurity, fear of failure, pressure, authenticity, and compassion fatigue.

After developing a description of each participant, the researcher used a reflexive strategy, creating a table where the participants' words were typed in the left column and the researchers' reactions, interpretations, and wonderings were input in the right column (see Table 1). This allowed the researchers to see how the researcher perspective affected the interpretation of the data.

During the second reading of the transcripts, researchers typed participants' responses (see Table 2). Completing this task allowed the analysis to focus on participants' words as a means to interpret their own actions and their relationships with others. This process helped refine key themes in the data.

During the third reading, the researchers' analysis rediscovered the importance of family support, especially spousal, as it pertained to the new school leaders' support network at home. Responses also revealed the importance of gaining the teachers' trust. Participants also emphasized the support network they had within their build-

ings. In the fourth reading, researchers highlighted social structures, ideologies, and theoretical themes. This process led to particular sociological and structural arguments about the research participants. For example, participants who were part of strong supportive teams felt less pressure and did not worry about job security. Frequently, participants shared their personal struggles in their roles as school leaders. They shared the tug of war they had with being a dedicated spouse and parent while being an effective leader. They shared their insecurities and fears. They shared their feelings of isolation. They shared how their concerns for certain students was all-consuming, creating feelings of exhaustion and burnout. They shared that they were not taking care of themselves as they used to, and as a result, they were not feeling healthy and balanced. Lastly, they shared the pressure they felt to perform at a highly effective level.

Table 1. Reader response reflexive strategy

Participant's response	Researcher's reactions, interpretations, and thoughts
The fear of the unknown that first year—not that there aren't new things all the time, but I pretty much know what's coming my way every day, even if it varies in degree of severity.	This confirms that this aspect was present in the fall transcripts—fear is a common emotion associated with the beginning of a new school leadership role.
So that first year, I think there was so much pressure on me to see the big picture right away.	Participants frequently refer to the pressure they were/are under in the first year.
But I think having this forum to talk about my purpose [helps], and to revisit it is something I don't do day-to-day, like reexamine why I'm doing it.	This retreat provides the space for these school leaders to reflect and re-connect with their purpose for getting in the field in the first place. This re-centering through focus groups seems to be cathartic to the participants.

Table 2. Response to community needs

Am I enough for what this community needs?
I would agree with you on that. Just all the learning and yet you're called upon to make the decisions and to not just sit back and watch.
I think I would add, too, my experience and what I've been—I've been doing some aptitude testing lately, and the principalship—never before do I have a better understanding of it as an administrative position.
So I feel like I'm doing a lot of things and none of them as well as I could.
I kind of feel like I'm on the outside, just bringing my knowledge to a community.
I think that there are some administrators who are called upon to come in and set up shop and set up camp for 20 years and really assimilate and just become that.
I'm nervous when you look at the national average of a principal.
I think I already do. I already have a lot more of a read of what to not step into, what is valued, what to not step into, what to not mess with, and then where the needs are that would be appreciated, and where my expertise would not be appreciated at this time and [I should] wait for that to develop over something.

The other focus group members offered support through humor and by relating to each other's struggles. The focus groups appeared to provide a space to release and process emotions. In this final reading of the data, researchers realized the extent of the cathartic nature of the focus groups. Although the researchers did not purposely intend for the focus groups to have a strong emotional component, it happened organically. As Richard Powell and Helen Single (1996) suggested, focus groups have potential therapeutic benefits, as they may improve morale and generate feelings of self-worth among participants. Another theme revealed in this final reading was that each participant described the first year as the hardest, but they shared how subsequent years were easier because things were more predictable and relationships had been established. Therefore, they were more confident and secure in the second year of their particular role.

Further analysis showed that participants experienced chronic stress within a wide array of contexts during their first years in school leadership positions. Throughout the focus group interviews, participants referred to the pressure they felt in their leadership roles. They described it as pressure to perform or meet expectations, and they even felt the stress to be perfect.

Jasmine recalled describing the pressure she felt as a principal to others outside of the profession. She felt 100 percent responsible for the achievements, social and emotional growth, and safety and security of the students and faculty in her building.

Andrea provided other examples of when she felt stress caused by work-related pressure:

I think another thing I was thinking of is just the degree of the pressure. I guess, the standard at which you're held for every face you make, for every word you say. You have to be careful of how that's perceived. And then I think of the safety issues. With our school and the Safe2Tell [Colorado's mechanism for anonymously reporting and helping someone who is struggling or hurting], I get all the Safe2Tell [notifications], and those come to my phone at two in the morning, and I think probably once or twice a week.

Another source of stress the participants discussed was having too much work to complete in the time allotted. Tyler explained how he viewed time constraints in his current role:

I would say as a first year, there's not enough hours in the day to get everything done that we need to get done. I think for me, it's just been this constant, almost like we were talking about last night, this constant climb where you might see over the ledge a little bit but then you just get piled on again.

Other participants frequently talked about feelings of isolation. School leaders feel alone as an emotional response rather than a structural reality. To this point, Ryan described his feeling on the isolative nature of school leadership:

You start to feel like, "I am the only one," which is a crazy feeling! I know this has been a battle in education for a long time. How do we eliminate the isolation that exists in a school building that is

filled with so many people? Yet everybody will say at some point, “I just feel so isolated.”

Participant comments regarding fear of failure and feelings of inadequacy or insecurity were present throughout the interviews. Kyle discussed his fears and insecurities often in the interviews:

I just can't do this anymore. I'm not wired for this job or whatever. Last year, I don't think I had many fears other than I don't want to mess up. All you have to bring to the community is yourself, and you are constantly questioning if this is what this community needs.

In response to other participants discussing fears of being non-renewed, Tyler described his fear of not performing and losing his job:

What you're saying is one of my fears, right? Talking about the average life of an assistant principal or principal in a building, and you come in and you learn the community, and you figure things out. You know what to do and what not to do, where to help and where to not help. And something happens, and the test scores go down—or something like that—and then they bring in someone else.

During the focus group interviews, participants described situations where they worried about the well-being of their students. They also described the stress they experienced as a result of their worrying or compassion fatigue.

Carter described the growing intensity of his compassion fatigue:

Like what stresses me and keeps me awake at night? It's the kids in crisis. It's kids who are having a bad experience at school. It's kids who can't come to school because of anxiety or the fight or the bullying and all that stuff. Then whenever you get them kind of stable, then they move. My God. Nobody knows them there. They're going to fall through the cracks! This stressor has progressed over the years.

Work-life balance was widely discussed during the interviews. Feelings of guilt ranged from missing precious time with their own family to being overweight and out of shape because they no longer found the time to exercise. Andrea shared her internal conflict between family and work:

For me, it's the balance of my family, and I know that feeds me so I can do my job. We had testing last week. I was there constantly. I was stressed because my kid was at daycare 10 hours a day.

At the first retreat, participants read the book *Together is Better* by Simon Sinek (2016). One statement particularly resonated with the participants, “You can't go it alone. So don't pretend you can” (p. 62). The analysis revealed what systems and structures the participants thought they needed to feel supported in order to remain in their positions. The overarching theme was the need for connecting with other non-evaluative school leaders in a non-evaluative space where they could be honest and vulnerable about their experiences. The participants appreciated having the time and space during the retreats to reflect on their practice and reconnect with their purpose. They also identified having a strong support system in their building,

an administration team, as a crucial element to their success. Some of secondary themes included: a) the growth and development of school leaders from year one to year two, and b) the emotional release occurring during the focus groups. Participants reported that the School Leadership Institute had given them a vastly different mentorship opportunity than they had experienced in their district mentorship programs.

Several participants spoke to their experiences in the School Leadership Institute during the focus group interviews. David provided his thoughts on what elements of this experience were most effective:

Going back to the original question of what do you actually need to be able to do this job? Maybe an answer is some really focused, intentional time with friends like we're doing now; to step back and to remind each other and remind ourselves of what we're doing.

Tyler shared how the School Leadership Institute had influenced him:

I was sitting there last night watching the recap a bit and just kind of thinking about the day, and I'm like, "Gosh, I just feel good." It's nice to just know that I'm not the only one. I've read it, I've seen it, I hear it, but actually sitting down and having a face-to-face conversation with people that are all in a similar sense and just hearing some of the ideas, some of the problem-solving, and some of the techniques, and just going back to that purpose has been so meaningful for me. And I feel like I could go back, even today, different, and just knowing we still have another day and a half together, I feel like it's going to be what I need to get through the year.

Carter expressed the need for non-evaluative connections and support in the field:

You've got to have a place to talk about your profession on that level without your supervisor sitting with you. You've got to be able to talk to other people doing the same thing without the boss sitting at the table too.

David shared his enthusiasm for the grounding nature of the focus groups and his excitement about giving back to the profession:

I love these focus groups. I get excited when we're going to do one because it's centered conversation. I think we continue to do that because it continues the research, too, because what people need will continue to change as the culture of education changes. So, it continues the research and it fills our tanks.

Trustworthiness

Regarding trustworthiness, the researchers used several techniques to ensure credibility and confirmability. They shared a draft copy of this article with two participants of the focus group interviews, David and Andrea, for review, and they also shared it with the two professors responsible for the inception of this project. The participants and professors were asked to share if the contents of the article rang true from their perspective. Researchers also met regularly with participants to conduct member-checking activities, such as discussing interpretations of the data. This ongoing

process with extensive participant involvement provided another examination of thinking, unpacked potential biases, and confirmed interpretations.

Conclusion

There is pressure on leaders to perform at a high level in schools from their first day on the job, yet support for newly practicing school leaders in the form of typical mentorship programs is often not what they actually need.

In today's climate of heightened expectations, principals are in the hot seat to improve teaching and learning. They need to be educational visionaries; instructional and curriculum leaders; assessment experts; disciplinarians; community builders; public relations experts; budget analysts; facility managers; special program managers; and expert overseers of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives. (Davita, 2010, p. 2)

Given this unwieldy list of responsibilities, it is not surprising that the participants in this study, as well as others in similar studies, have acknowledged that the challenges in their school leadership roles have manifested as chronic stress. The findings in this study are a springboard for future research on new school administrator mentorship practices and policy. The analysis of transcripts from 16 focus group interviews indicate that school leaders face extraordinary challenges in a fast-paced, unforgiving environment. Over time, these chronic stressors influence new school leaders' mental and physical health. The results of this analysis indicate that universities and school districts could consider specific components of this unique mentorship program as a foundation to grow meaningful mentorships to better prepare and retain new school leaders. Most importantly, this study suggests that mentorships ought to be relationship focused and provide new school leaders with a non-evaluative space to address their stressors, coping strategies, and overall well-being. Participants specifically appreciated the reflective structure as well as the supportive and trusting environment in the School Leadership Institute, finding it to be highly effective as an alternative mentorship experience. What sets this study apart from previously conducted studies is how the participants had the unique opportunity to have their voices lifted as they self-identified their stressors and needs in their initial years as school leaders.

Website

Wallace Foundation, <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/pages/default.aspx>

References

- Agar, M., & MacDonald, J. (1995). Focus groups and ethnography. *Human Organization*, 54(1), 78–86. doi:10.17730/humo.54.1.x102372362631282
- Bartoletti, & Connelly. (2013). *Leadership matters: What the leadership says about the importance of principal leadership*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of School Principals and National Association of Elementary School Principals.
- Boyland, L. (2011). Job stress and coping skills of elementary principals: A statewide study. *Current Issues in Education*, 14(3), 1–6. Retrieved March 15, 2020, from <https://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu>.

- Brock, B.L., & Grady, M.L. (2002). *Avoiding burnout: A principal's guide to keeping the fire alive*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (July, 2006). *Qualitative research guidelines project*. Retrieved April 25, 2019, from <http://www.qualres.org/HomeRefl-3703.html>.
- Colbert, D. (2008). *Stress less: Break the power of worry, fear, and other unhealthy habits*. Siloam Press (online book depository).
- Cox, T., & Griffiths, A. (2010). Work-related stress: A theoretical perspective. In S. Leka, & J. Houdmout (Eds.), *Occupational Health Psychology* (pp. 31–56). West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
- Devita, C. (2010). *Four big lessons from a decade of work: An agenda for school improvement* [PDF file]. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/four-big-lessons-education-leadership-an-agenda-for-school-improvement.aspx>.
- Doud, James L., & Keller, Edward P. (1998, September). The K-8 Principal in 1998. *Principal* 78, 1, 5, 6, 8, 10–12. (EJ 570 135).
- Holloway, J. (2004). Mentoring new leaders. *Educational Leadership*, 61(7), 87–88. Retrieved February 21, 2020, from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr04/vol61/num07/-Mentoring-New-Leaders.aspx>.
- Howard, M., & Mallory, B. (2008). Perceptions of isolation among high school principals. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*, 6(1), 7–27. Retrieved February 10, 2020, from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel>.
- Humble, A., & Radina, M. (2019). *How qualitative data analysis happens*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Mitgang, L., & Gill, J. (2012). *The making of the principal: Five lessons in leadership training. Perspective*. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation. Retrieved January 21, 2020, from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/The-Making-of-the-Principal-Five-Lessons-in-Leadership-Training.pdf>.
- Onwuegbuzie, A.J., Dickinson, W.B., Leech, N.L., & Zoran, A.G. (2009). A qualitative framework for collecting and analyzing data in focus group research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(3), 1–20. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800301>
- Powell, R., & Single, H. (1996). Methodology matters-V, focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 8(5), 499–504. Retrieved January 13, 2020, from <https://academic.oup.com/intqhc>.
- Sinek, S. (2016). *Together is better*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.
- Skovholt, T., & Trotter-Mathison, M. (2016). *The resilient practitioner*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sogunro, O.A. (2012). Stress in school administration: Coping tips for principals. *Journal of School Leadership*, 22(3), 664–700. doi: 10.1177/2F105268461202200309
- Szachowicz, S., & Wolder, S. (2014). Five things new principals need to succeed. *ASCD Express*, 9(23), 2–3. Retrieved February 17, 2020, from <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol9/923-szachowicz.aspx>.
- Turnbull, B.J., Anderson, L.M., Riley, D.L., MacFarlane, J.R., & Aladjem, D.K. (2016, October). *The principal pipeline initiative in action*. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation. Retrieved March 5, 2020, from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Building-a-Stronger-Principalship-Vol-5-The-Principal-Pipeline-Initiative-in-Action.pdf>.