Assistant Principal Transitions into the Principalship: A Qualitative Study Informed by Constructive-Developmental Theory

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Abstract
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Given the immense challenges of the principalship and the high turnover of school principals, school districts—and other organizations—have looked to assistant principals as a major source of leadership talent to take up the role of principal. In this qualitative dissertation I explored how eight principals—from different USA locations—described, understood, and experienced the transition from assistant principal to principal. Specifically, I examined what they named as the professional learning experiences they had on the way to becoming principals and how, if at all, their prior learnings supported them in this transition. Additionally, my study used purposeful developmental sampling to explore how, if at all, participants’ way of knowing (i.e., internal cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities), as assessed by an expert developmental psychologist who employed the Subject-Object Interview (a reliable developmental assessment tool), might help with understanding how they made meaning of their experiences in transitioning to the principalship and their learning experiences along the way.

This study is unique in that it focuses on the experiences of assistant principals—who have become principals—and provides a rich insight during a particularly critical and vulnerable time in their career trajectory. The study has implications for how school districts and district leaders—superintendents and principals—can provide differentiated supports for aspiring school principals.

I recruited an expert developmental psychologist to conduct Subject-Object Interviews in order to develop a purposeful sample of eight participants, four who have a predominately socializing way of knowing and four who have a predominately self-authoring way of knowing. Eight Subject-Object interviews and sixteen in-depth, qualitative interviews (approximately 36 hours, transcribed verbatim) were the primary data source. Data analysis involved several iterative steps, including writing analytic notes and memos; reviewing, coding, categorizing data to identify key themes within and across cases; and crafting narrative summaries.
I learned from the participants that their transition to the principalship involved increasing complexity in their work in three dimensions: an increased breadth of responsibilities (8 of 8), including budgeting, scheduling, supervision of all staff, and, in some cases, district politics (4 of 8); more complex interpersonal conflict among a higher number of stakeholders as they transitioned to assume a new mantle of authority as principal (8 of 8); and looking inward to clarify their internal values, which they said helped manage the breadth and depth of the first two dimensions of complexity (8 of 8). I also found two types of professional learning experiences that participants named as most helpful during their transition. The first was receiving mentoring (8 of 8), and the second was leading a large, complex project during their time as assistant principal (4 of 8). An additional three participants said that they had wished most for the opportunity to lead a large, complex project like those described by the other participants (3 of 8).

For all five of the major findings – the three dimensions of complexity referenced above and the two types of professional learning that were most helpful to the participants in their transition – I found that the participant’s way of knowing was connected to how they experienced, made sense of, and managed that aspect of their transition.

Predominantly socializing knowers struggled to manage their time and determine which priorities were most important and often described that their rise to this level of authority left them feeling lonely or as an outsider (4 of 4) and that it was difficult to manage conflicts and the expectations that others had of them as principals (4 of 4). In addition, those with at least some capacity self-authorship described an awareness of how new principals needed to do the hard work to develop these internal values (3 of 3).

In contrast, the predominantly self-authoring participants told me that they did not feel like they were being pulled in multiple directions and described systems they had created to manage this kind of complexity (4 of 4). They also understood and appreciated others’ expectations of them as the authority figure and could turn inside to clarify their own beliefs to effectively manage the conflicts that arose (4 of 4). Finally, they pointed to these inner values as
foundational to meeting the different types of complexity inherent in transitioning to the principalship (4 of 4). For the aspiring principals who are predominately self-authoring, they shared a higher level of comfort in their own ability to handle the increasing complexities that come with the principalship, and each of them (4 of 4) shared that they felt like they got what they needed as assistant principals to prepare them for the transition.

For aspiring principals who are predominantly socializing in their way of knowing, my research shows that their learning opportunities need to be designed to help them develop a level of comfort with conflict as an opportunity for positive change rather than something to avoid altogether. Furthermore, I recommend that principals mentor with developmental intentionality such that they tailor their mentorship and feedback to make it effective for each AP they mentor. Last, I recommend that principals provide opportunities for APs to lead large complex projects, appropriately scaled based on the AP’s developmental readiness.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables ........................................................................................................... vi
List of Figures .......................................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................... viii
Dedication ................................................................................................................ ix

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW ...................................................... 1
  The Adult Development Context .......................................................................... 4
  Problem Statement ................................................................................................. 7
    The Challenges and Influence of Principal Turnover ........................................... 8
    Supporting Assistant Principals Who Become Principals ................................... 9
  Purpose of Study ..................................................................................................... 11
  Research Questions ............................................................................................... 11
  Conceptual Framework .......................................................................................... 12
    Constructive-Developmental Theory and Way of Knowing ................................ 13
    Formal and Informal Structures for Professional Learning ............................... 15
      Formal learning opportunities ........................................................................ 15
      Informal learning opportunities .................................................................... 16
  Summary of Conceptual Framework ...................................................................... 17
  Methodological Overview ....................................................................................... 18
    Selection Criteria for Participants .................................................................... 18
    Data Collection Methods .................................................................................... 19
    Timing of Interviews ............................................................................................ 19
    Subject-Object Interview .................................................................................... 20
    Semi-Structured Substantive Interviews ............................................................ 21
    Data Analysis ....................................................................................................... 22
    Validity ................................................................................................................ 23
    Reactivity .............................................................................................................. 24
    Researcher Bias ................................................................................................. 24
    Validity Summary ............................................................................................... 25
  Personal Interest ..................................................................................................... 26
  Implications and Significance of this Study ........................................................... 29
  Organization of this Dissertation ......................................................................... 31

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................................... 33
  The Changing Roles of Principals and Assistant Principals .................................. 35
  The Challenges of Principal Turnover .................................................................... 36
    Principal Retention and Turnover ....................................................................... 38
    Assistant Principals and the School Leadership Pipeline .................................... 41
  Professional Development for School Leaders ...................................................... 42
    Leadership Support for New Principals ............................................................. 43
    Supporting Assistant Principals Who Become Principals .................................... 45
  Adult Development ............................................................................................... 46
Sample Size .............................................................................................................. 87
Chapter Summary ...................................................................................................... 88

CHAPTER IV – INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR CONTEXTS ........89
David .......................................................................................................................... 90
  Background and Roles Before Becoming AP ......................................................... 91
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 92
  Current School Setting .......................................................................................... 92
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................... 92
Jesse ........................................................................................................................... 93
  Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal ............................... 94
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 95
  Current School Setting .......................................................................................... 96
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................... 96
Carlos ........................................................................................................................ 97
  Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal ............................... 97
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 98
  Current School Setting .......................................................................................... 98
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................... 99
Tamara ....................................................................................................................... 99
  Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal ............................... 100
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 100
  Current School Setting ........................................................................................ 101
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................. 102
Kelly .......................................................................................................................... 102
  Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal ............................... 103
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 103
  Current School Setting ........................................................................................ 104
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................. 104
Lauren ......................................................................................................................... 104
  Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal ............................... 105
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 106
  Current School Setting ........................................................................................ 107
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................. 108
Rebecca ...................................................................................................................... 108
  Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal ............................... 109
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 109
  Current School Setting ........................................................................................ 110
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................. 111
Regina ......................................................................................................................... 111
  Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal ............................... 111
  The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal ....................................... 112
  Current School Setting ........................................................................................ 113
  Developmental Assessment .................................................................................. 114
Chapter Summary .................................................................................................... 115
References ................................................................................................................................. 223
Appendix A: Interview 1 Protocol For Principals ................................................................. 232
Appendix B: Interview 2 Protocol For Principals ................................................................. 236
Appendix C: Letter Of Invitation For Participants ............................................................ 239
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form ................................................................................... 240
Appendix E: Dissertation Timeline—Updated ......................................................................... 243
Appendix F: Subject-Object Interview Protocol (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 2011) .................................................................................................................................. 244
List of Tables

Table 2.1: Socializing Knowers: Supports and Challenges for Growth ........................................54
Table 2.2: Self-Authoring Knowers: Supports and Challenges for Growth ..................................55
Table 2.3: Types of Professional Development ..................................................................57
Table 3.1: Matrix Relating Research Questions to Conceptual Framework and Data

Collection ........................................................................................................................70
Table 3.2: Categorization of Participants ............................................................................76
Table 4.1: Participants .........................................................................................................115
Table 5.1: Summary of Findings in Chapter V ..................................................................119
Table 5.2: Brief Biographical Reminder of Participants ......................................................121
Table 5.3: An Increased Breadth of Responsibility According to the Development of Each

Participant ........................................................................................................................124
Table 5.4: Managing Interpersonal Conflict According to the Development of Each

Participant ........................................................................................................................140
Table 5.5: Clarifying Internal Values According to the Development of Each Participant .......157
Table 6.1: Summary of Findings in Chapter VI .................................................................173
Table 6.2: Mentoring According to the Developmental Orientation of Each Participant .......176
Table 6.3: Opportunities to Lead Complex Projects According to the Development of Each

Participant ........................................................................................................................191
List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Kegan's (1982, 1994) Orders of Mind and Transitional Stages Between Orders.......52
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A. Y. C. C.
Dedication

To my parents, Gary and Lillian, who sacrificed so much and immigrated to the United States so that their children can a have a new beginning;

To my partner, Serena, for believing in me and helping me become the best version of myself.
Chapter I
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Although the role of the principal has changed dramatically over the last several decades, it is still easy to conjure an image of a principal whose exclusive focus is on ensuring the school runs smoothly, e.g., getting the buses to show up on time, ordering enough classroom supplies, disciplining problematic children, etc. (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Armstrong, 2015; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Drago-Severson, 2014; Oleszwiski, 2012). In the public’s mind, school principals have often been thought of as mere school-building managers whose job is to enforce the rules (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; MetLife, 2013). However, the demands placed upon principals have changed significantly. Teacher-evaluation and school-accountability systems have led principals to develop new competencies largely centered around quantitative data, curriculum, pedagogy, and human development (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; Davis et al., 2017; MetLife, 2013; Swen 2020). These increased responsibilities have been added to traditional managerial demands (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; MetLife, 2013; Yan, 2020).

With the increased responsibility for both managing the building and leading the staff, the role of the principal can feel overwhelming and unsustainable (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Drago-Severson, 2012, 2016; McKibben, 2013). Principals, now more than ever, focus on student achievement while still retaining their traditional administrative and building manager duties (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; MetLife, 2013; Swen 2020). Because of this, principals typically work 10-hour days and many believe the job is just not
doable as it is configured now (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; Swen 2020). In a 2011 survey of American educators, 75% reported that their jobs are too complex and have led to high levels of stress and low job satisfaction (MetLife, 2012; Grissom et al., 2021). As new recruits assume the position of principal, the difficulty of the job often proves overwhelming (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Drago-Severson, 2012). Principals do not feel sufficiently prepared by their preservice training to successfully meet the demands of school leadership (Cocoran et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Drago-Severson, 2016; Jensen, 2014; McKibben, 2013).

Because the principalship can be extremely difficult and because there is high turnover, school districts have looked to assistant principals as a major source of leadership talent to take up the role of principal (Bartanen et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2017; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Jensen, 2014; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). As of 2018, for example, there were more than 2500 assistant principals in New York City’s public schools. With deliberate and individualized support, hundreds or even thousands of them can have a future as successful school principals (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016; Milkesa et al., 2014; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). While New York City is the largest public school district in the nation, I use it often as a point of reference to describe many of the same challenges that districts throughout the country face.

My study focused on assistant principals who had become principals in the past three years. I was hoping to develop a better understanding of how a group of eight principals experienced the transition from assistant principal to principal and how, from a developmental
perspective, they made meaning of their experience and how that might be influenced by their ways of knowing.

Each of us has a “way of knowing” that filters how we understand ourselves, how we see others, and how we make sense of our relationships (Drago-Severson, 2009). A person’s way of knowing shapes how she understands her role and responsibilities. Our ways of knowing also influence what kinds of supports are helpful to growing our capacity to understand the world, our relationships, and our leadership development (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009). In addition, professional learning experiences can take many different shapes and forms. In some places, this might be a formal mentoring system and induction programs setup for new school leaders. Professional learning might also be informal study groups with other school leaders. Each of these professional learning experiences could have a different impact on different individuals.

In this study, I aimed to understand how principals, who had been assistant principals, describe, understand, and experience the transition from assistant principal to principal, and what they name as the professional learning experiences they have experienced and how, if at all, these have supported them in this transition. The focus of my dissertation research was to understand the experiences of principals who made meaning with different ways of knowing — and to examine closely how they experienced the transition from assistant principal to principal.

I also note that my study—i.e., my literature review, research design, and data collection were all conducted before February of 2020, just weeks before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept through the United States and the world. Had I interviewed the participants in my study during the pandemic, I am sure that the new challenges of leading schools during remote and hybrid learning would have featured prominently in what they would have shared. The stories and the experiences of principals told here do not contain the words quarantine,
social distancing, and proper ventilation. As a superintendent working with 48 schools in New York City, I have observed first-hand just how much more complicated and challenging the principal’s job has become. To lead schools, principals have become front-line healthcare workers, ventilation experts, and press secretaries. Their work has also extracted a severe emotional toll as making key decisions in the school often meant trading off some public health risk to have more students learning in school. The challenges and complexities inherent in the principalship have only magnified since the completion of the data collection for this study. However, I also know that many principals have become much more resilient and stronger as a result. I am confident that the findings of this study can be of help to the brand-new principals in facing these new challenges.

The Adult Development Context

As mentioned above, the demands placed upon principals have changed significantly; the current demands of leading schools in the 21st century requires an increased responsibility for both managing the building and leading the staff (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; Grissom et al., 2021; MetLife, 2013). Focusing on the principalship and the leadership pipeline is of critical importance to the success of our schools (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018). As discussed above, districts have looked to assistant principals as a major source of leadership talent for the principalship (Armstrong, 2015; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; New Leaders, 2014; Oleszewski et al., 2012). However, principal recruitment is only one part of the challenge. School districts also need to support new principals so that they can manage the complex responsibilities of the principalship (Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Grissom et al., 2021; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Adult development theory can inform our understanding of how principals make sense of

Drago-Severson builds on Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994, 2000) theory and defines growth or transformational learning as increasing the “cognitive, affective, interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities that enable us to manage better the complex demands of teaching, learning, leadership, and life” (2009, p. 8). *Way of Knowing* is Drago-Severson’s (2004b, 2009, 2016) term for the developmental stages that adults progress through as increase their cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal capacity. She explains that it is, “A person’s meaning-making system through which all experience is filtered and understood” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 9). She continues, “A person’s way of knowing dictates how they will make sense of reality. It is the filter through which people interpret their experiences, largely determining their capacities for perspective taking on self, others, and the relationship between the two. As such, it determines how learning experiences (and all life experience) will be taken in, managed, understood, and used” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 9). Drago-Severson has written (2009, 2011, 2012, 2016) about the many ways we can use adult development theory to support school leaders.

Over the past two decades, researchers like Drago-Severson have been deepening our understanding of *constructive-developmental theory* (C-DT, hereafter). By *developmental needs*, I refer to the particular needs one may have – depending one’s developmental level or *way of knowing*. Each of us has a *way of knowing* that filters how we understand ourselves, how we see others, and make sense of our relationships (Drago-Severson, 2008). A person’s way of knowing shapes how she understands her role and responsibilities. Our ways of knowing also influence the kinds of supports are helpful to growing our capacity to understand the world, our relationships, and our leadership development (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009). The literature in
this field explains ways that leaders can be deliberate in matching the right kinds of professional development to an individual’s way of knowing (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2016; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000). All adult learners, including principals and assistant principals, have different ways of knowing that influence the kinds of supports and challenges that are needed to support growth in their internal capacity to understand the world and to manage the complex challenges they encounter in their leadership (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial that we gain a better understanding of the experiences of these assistant principals as they undergo the transition to principals.

Drago-Severson (2004b, 2009) points to the importance of understanding a person’s way of knowing to inform how to employ particular practices (e.g., Drago-Severson’s pillar practices) to support his or her growth. She has researched adult learning and adult development extensively with teachers, assistant principals, principals, and superintendents (Drago-Severson 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016). She has studied how individuals in the workplace make sense of their learning (Drago-Severson, 2004a), how principals meet the development needs of teachers by employing pillar practices which she names as: collegial inquiry, mentoring, providing leadership roles, and teaming (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009; Drago-Severson et al., 2013), and how participants in a transformational leadership course applied principles of adult development and practices for supporting growth (Drago-Severson et al., 2013). She has captured ideas around leading adult learning and leadership development (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012) and the importance of the core self, of looking after one’s own development and how it affects one’s ability to lead others as they grow and develop in order to better support student learning (Drago-Severson, 2012, 2016).
The shift from being managers to instructional leaders has also placed new and increasingly complex demands on principals. More specifically, districts increasingly are asking principals to adapt from a chiefly managerial role (e.g., scheduling, budgeting, and imposing discipline) to being a school’s primary adult developer and architect of the collaborative learning community (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012, 2018; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018; Samuels, 2008). For assistant principals becoming new principals, this often requires them to take on a new perspective (Spillane et al., 2015). Given these challenges and changing expectations, it is crucial to apply our knowledge of adult learning and development to help stakeholders understand new contexts and to co-construct solutions to problems. As Drago-Severson (2009) notes:

Without the appropriate tools and supports needed to meet such challenges, many principals, superintendents, and teachers leave their professions for more supportive environments (Donaldson, 2008; Moller & Pankake, 2006; Murphy, 2006; Teitel, 2006). The use of effective support models for leadership development in schools help us build our cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities. Increasing these capacities can make the difference in adaptively addressing complex challenges. (p. 7)

Given the complexity of this leadership challenge, and the research on adult development and adult learning, a deeper understanding of how new principals, describe, understand, and experience the leadership supports as they transition from assistant principal to principal could help illuminate promising and novel approaches to leadership development.

**Problem Statement**

In this section, I provide an overview of the challenges of principal turnover before introducing some of the research that show how supporting assistant principals in becoming principals may be one way of addressing the leadership pipeline challenge.
The Challenges and Influence of Principal Turnover

A 2014 study of the costs of principal turnover by The School Leaders Network reported that 20% of newly minted principals left their positions within two years. Moreover, schools that lost principals were more likely to perform poorly the subsequent year (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Jensen, 2014; Mitgang, 2012; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). These findings indicate that a lack of continuity in leadership bodes poorly for schools and underscore the importance of districts having well-designed plans for recruitment, training, and ongoing support of their principals.

As districts consider strategies to improve the leadership pipeline, they have looked to their existing teacher leaders and assistant principals (Burkhauser et al., 2012; McKibben, 2013; Mitgang, 2012; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018; Spillane et al., 2015). The role of assistant principal is a logical stepping-stone for those who want to eventually become school principals (Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Jensen, 2014; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). However, a 2013 Bain Leadership Study found that in many cases there is not a clear definition of which skills must be developed while assistant principals prepare for the principalship (Bierly, 2013). The Bierly (2013) survey study also found an absence of consistent structures to ensure appropriate learning experiences support AP’s development of the skills and capacities they will need as principals. The inconsistency of the professional development experiences as assistant principals combined with different ways of knowing may lead to significant differences in how new principals are prepared their new roles and how they make sense of the preparation.

Just as teachers become more effective with supports and challenges aimed at facilitating their growth, so do principals, especially in their first three years (Clark, Martorell & Rockoff, 2009; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). Furthermore, no matter how effective a
principal was at his or her previous school, or whether they are a new or experienced principal, when he or she transfers to a new school it takes approximately five years to fully stabilize and improve the teaching staff as well as fully implement policies and practices to positively impact the school’s performance (Grissom et al., 2021; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Effective principals still make significant improvements in their first few years; however, their effectiveness increases over time (Milkesa et al., 2014; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Yet the average length of a principal’s tenure is three to four years for the average school (Grissom et al., 2021; Milkesa et al., 2014; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). In low-performing schools and schools serving disadvantaged students, the average tenure is even shorter. Given these statistics, it can be extremely valuable to consider ways to support assistant principals who become new principals so that the first few years of the principalship can be more successful and so that these new leaders can sustain their work (Grissom et al., 2021).

I hope my study will help us understand the experiences of some of those newer principals during their first two years of the principalship so that we may be able to do a better job of supporting these school leaders with what Drago-Severson refers to as developmental intentionality (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016).

**Supporting Assistant Principals Who Become Principals**

School districts have recognized the importance of having robust plans for training and supporting their current and aspiring school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Gill, 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Heyes & Burkett, 2020; Honig, 2012). A key aspect of this is aimed at supporting those assistant principals who aspire to become school principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018; Heyes & Burkett, 2020).
Scholars have examined the role of assistant principals and have shown that while the role of assistant principal can be a logical stepping-stone for those who want to eventually become principals, the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals are frequently different across so schools so their ability to make use of those learning opportunities are uneven (Barnett et al., 2017; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Jensen, 2014; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012).

Unfortunately, leadership development for assistant principals often becomes catch-as-catch-can, and in most cases that results in it getting pushed aside for more urgent priorities (Barnett et al., 2017; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Heyes & Burkett, 2020; Jensen, 2014). Within most districts there are a variety of professional learning opportunities that are available to help assistant principals learn how to navigate the complex and difficult work of leading schools (Barnett et al., 2017; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Heyes & Burkett, 2020; Jensen, 2014). For example, some districts have mandatory professional development workshops for new assistant principals. In large districts with administrator unions, those organizations may also offer optional workshops, however, the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals are frequently different across schools so their ability to make use of these learning opportunities is uneven (Barnett et al., 2017; Corcoran et al., 2012; Heyes & Burkett, 2020; Jensen, 2014; Oleszewski, 2012).

Additionally, adult learners, including principals and assistant principals, have different ways of knowing that influence the kinds of supports that helpful in growing their internal capacities to understand the world and to manage the complex challenges they encounter in their leadership (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2016). Adult development theory can inform the growth of assistant principals as they transition into the principalship (Drago-Severson, 2009,
2011, 2012, 2016, 2018). However, we do not know much about the experiences of assistant principals as they transition to their new roles as principals. It is important that we gain a better understanding of how these assistant principals experience and make meaning of the various professional learning opportunities. This understanding may potentially help school district leaders – superintendents, and principals – provide differentiated supports for their aspiring school principals. This is a gap that my research was designed to partially address.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of my qualitative interview multi-case study was to develop an understanding of how a group of eight principals with different ways of knowing described, understood, and experienced the transition from assistant principal to principal, and what they named as the professional learning experiences they experienced and how, if at all, these supported them in this transition. More specifically, I aimed to use the lens of constructive-developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2016; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000) to learn how these principals described their learning needs and how they made sense of how they were supported and challenged to grown in their leadership while they were assistant principals.

**Research Questions**

1. How do eight principals with three or fewer years of experience in the role, four of whom are predominantly socializing in their way of knowing and four of whom are predominantly self-authoring in their way of knowing, describe and understand their transition from assistant principal to principal?

2. What professional learning experiences do assistant principals describe as most helpful in preparing them for the principalship and which learning experiences do they wish they had to better prepare them for the work of the principalship?
3. What are the relationships, if any, between the participants’ different ways of making meaning as adult learners and their experiences as assistant principals? Are there patterns in the ways that assistant principals with similar and different developmental positions make sense of their professional learning experiences and this transition to becoming a new principal?

The purpose of my research was to learn more about how principals who have recently transitioned from an assistant principalship to the principalship make sense of the leadership support they have received. My hope was that the perspectives that I gathered from principals who are in their first three years would make clear how we can utilize adult development theory to better understand how leaders with different ways of knowing receive and make sense of professional development and how they perceive the various challenge and supports that have helped them in the transition to the principalship.

**Conceptual Framework**

In this section, I explain the intersection of the two different frameworks and literature that guided my study (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014): Constructive-Developmental Theory (C-DT), and formal and informal professional learning (F/I PL). C-DT is a powerful framework that helped me to better see patterns in how participants in my study responded to their experiences as the data collection and to support my analysis of the experiences varied by F/I PL. That is, Constructive-Development Theory can offer insight into why individual novice principals react as they do to more formal or more informal professional learning opportunities.

CD-T and *ways of knowing* formed my primary theoretical lens for this entire study. Adults’ ways of knowing can be a key that unlocks much greater understanding how we can better prepare assistant principals for their transition to the principalship (Drago-Severson,
Way of knowing (WOK) is at the heart of my third research question, and my entire project was aimed at applying it to the challenge and opportunity of supporting new principals as they transition from assistant principal to principal. (See Methodological Overview and Chapter II for explanations about how, and when, I integrate WOK into my analysis.)

In this section, I provide a brief theoretical overview and explanation of the connections between existing literature, previous studies, and my research questions about new principals and how they describe, understand, and experience the transition, and the influence of professional learning opportunities to support them in this transition. This framework provided the theoretical foundation that informed my research questions, interview guide, and methodological design.

**Constructive-Developmental Theory and Way of Knowing**

One major area of research that informed my research questions was adult development theory, and more specifically constructive-developmental theory. In this section, I provide a brief overview of constructive-developmental theory and ways of knowing.

Over the past two decades, researchers like Robert Kegan and Drago-Severson have been deepening our understanding of *Constructive-Developmental Theory* (C-DT). Each of us has a *way of knowing* that filters how we understand ourselves, how we see others, and our relationships; a person’s way of knowing shapes how she or he understands her role and responsibilities (Drago-Severson, 2009). Our way of knowing also influences what kinds of supports are helpful to grow our capacity to understand the world and to manage the complexities of our world (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009). Drago-Severson (2004b, 2009) points
to the importance of understanding a person’s way of knowing in order to inform how to employ particular practices so that they can support adults with different ways of knowing.

Although there are discrete, broad stages in a person’s development of way of knowing, it is important to note that there are also distinct and identifiable transitional stages (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016; Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988, 2011). As explained by Drago-Severson (2009):

…[a] way of knowing is my term for developmental levels that profoundly affect how we as human beings make meaning of experiences and dictates how we make sense of reality. In the context of education, our ways of knowing shapes the way we understand our role and responsibilities as a teacher, principal, superintendent, or learning and the way we think… A person’s way of knowing is not random; it is stable and consistent for a period of time and reflects a coherent system of logic. A way of knowing might feel more like the way we are rather than something we have. (p. 399)

This way of knowing framework is based on Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory (1982, 1994, 2000) and helps us understand how each of us, depending on our way of knowing, can grow during adulthood. This framework can help us get a deeper understanding of how individual adults make sense of the professional learning opportunities presented to them.

Drago-Severson’s research (2004b, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2016) shows that adult learners can benefit from both supports and challenges. Supports meet learners where they are in a comfortable way, providing security to the learner. Challenges, on the other hand, push the learner to grow – even creating a demand that they grow/learn/develop, because of the discomfort that they can create. As Drago-Severson’s work (2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016) has shown it is essential to offer both supports and challenges in order to facilitate internal capacity building in adult learners, I was interested in both as contributors to professional learning. Her research has also shown that most leaders have either socializing or self-authorizing ways of knowing (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016), or a way of knowing that blends the two meaning-making structures, and therefore my research will focus on those two main ways of
knowing. Throughout my dissertation, I used several different terms to refer to each participant’s way of knowing, including how they make meaning, their mind (e.g., “their self-authoring mind”), or their lens on the world. Each of these metaphors for way of knowing are commonly used often by other authors using constructive-developmental theory (see: Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013; Kegan, 1982, 1994).

**Formal and Informal Structures for Professional Learning**

The other major part of my conceptual framework is aimed at understanding the various professional learning opportunities and experiences that can be part of the assistant principalship. In this section, I provide an overview of the formal and informal structures for professional learning.

**Formal learning opportunities.** Formal learning opportunities are structured learning environments with a specified curriculum, such as graduate courses or mandated staff development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). These are often full- or half-day activities in which experts disseminate information that can be applied in the workplace (Desimone, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This *formal learning* model assumes that adult learners update their knowledge and skills by means of workshops and courses (Desimone, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Many states require teachers to attend such activities on a regular basis. As such, they are still the most widely recognized form of professional development (European Education Information Network (EURYDICE), 2008; National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 2004). In New York State, for example, requires teachers to complete 100 hours of sponsor-approved Continuing Teacher and Leader Education (CTLE) per five-year period, in order to maintain their teaching licenses (NYSED, 2017). According to New
York’s Department of Education these CTLEs are “activities designed to improve the teacher or leader’s pedagogical and/or leadership skills, targeted at improving student performance” (NYSED, 2016). The New York Department of Education also maintains a list of approved sponsors that can officially offer CTLE credits. While the participants from my study are drawn from a national sample outside of New York, most states have similar systems to the example offered by New York State (NYSED, 2017).

**Informal learning opportunities.** Informal learning opportunities, in contrast, do not follow a specified curriculum and are not restricted to particular environments (Desimone, 2009; Desimone et al., 2014; Jones & Dexter, 2014). Scholars (Desimone et al., 2014; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Mesler & Spillane, 2009) have included in this category both individual activities (e.g., reading books and classroom observations) and collaborative activities (e.g., conversations with colleagues and parents, mentoring activities, teacher networks and study groups).

Participation in informal learning activities is frequently not mandatory (Eurydice, 2008; NASDTEC, 2004), but rather is at teachers’ own initiative. Moreover, informal learning opportunities are more often embedded in the classroom or school context than are formal learning opportunities – which allows teachers to reflect on their practice and to learn from their colleagues (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richter et al., 2011). This kind of learning can be a cooperative process in which teachers come together to discuss and share knowledge, learning from each other’s experiences and gaining new insights into teaching and learning (Jones & Dexter, 2014; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richter et al., 2011).

In my study, considering both principals’ prior formal and prior informal professional learning opportunities—including during their assistant principalships—was particularly important because research shows that adults describe and understand these different kinds of
learning opportunities differently (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Desimone et al., 2014; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Richter et al., 2011). This idea of formal/informal professional learning opportunities informed the design of my interview guide and helped me follow up when participants initially overlooked the informal learning opportunities (see interview protocols in Appendix A and Appendix B). For example, professional literature can serve as a resource for designing team meetings and suggest ways of dealing with work-related demands (Goldsmith et al., 2014) and yet, participants may not mention it because they formal learning as the main component of professional learning (Desimone et al., 2014). As I sought to gain a better understand of the professional learning opportunities that have influenced the development of these assistant principals in research questions one and two, it was important that I have a framework to process and understand their responses.

Understanding how individuals go about the process of learning on their own and how they take on personal responsibility for learning decisions was critical for mapping the responses of the participants in my study. In my study, considering both the idea of formal vs informal learning and ways of knowing helped me to understand how these new principals make sense of their professional learning opportunities.

**Summary of Conceptual Framework**

Within this conceptual framework, I have described the ways that my study’s design and analysis was driven by consideration of ways of knowing and formal and informal learning theory. In my study, this idea of considering both formal and informal professional learning opportunities for assistant principals who are now principals was particularly important because research shows that adults describe and understand these learning opportunities differently (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Desimone et al., 2014; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Richter et al., 2011).
Drago-Severson has long made clear that whether a person sees a learning opportunity as a support or as a challenge is very much shaped by his or her way of knowing. As I considered the various experiences of the participants in my study, I kept in mind that their reactions to differences in formal vs. informal learning contexts will be mediated by each participant’s way of knowing. As I analyzed data, I used these two bodies of literature to help me see and better understand what kinds of contributors are more commonly cited and understand if there are any patterns among participants who primarily see the world through a socializing lens versus those participants who primarily see the world through a self-authoring lens.

My hope was that the perspectives that I gathered from novice principals with different ways of knowing would partially address the gap in what we know about how leaders with different ways of knowing receive and make sense of professional learning and how they perceive the various challenge and supports that have helped them in the transition to the principalship.

**Methodological Overview**

In this section, I provide a brief overview of my research methodology. I discuss it in greater detail in Chapter III. Here I outline the selection criteria for the participants, the recruitment process, as well as the details of my data collection and data analysis. I conclude with a brief preview of the validity threats in my study and how I attended to them.

**Selection Criteria for Participants**

I had four major selection criteria for individual participants, listed below. The detailed rationale for each selection criterion is in Chapter III. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the criteria.

1. Principals who are in their first, second, or third year as principal.
2. Principals who worked as assistant principals, or in roles of similar type, immediately prior to their current appointment as principal.

3. Principals who lead general academic schools.

4. Principals who are not under my direct supervision.

Each potential participant was recruited using a formal letter of invitation (see Appendix C) and provided an informed consent form overseen by the IRB (see Appendix D). I asked each participant to sign and return the informed consent form.

**Data Collection Methods**

Below, I introduce the types of interviews that were used to gather data from participants, the rationale of the interviews, and the timing of the interviews.

**Timing of Interviews**

The first round of Subject-Object Interviews (SOIs) were administered by Dr. Nancy Popp in December 2019 to February 2020. I provide additional details about the SOIs in a later section. Once I had assurances from the expert developmental interviewer that certain participants could be admitted to my study while ensuring sufficient developmental diversity in the sample, I began conducting qualitative interviews with the principals. The two qualitative interviews occurred December 2019 to February 2020.

I remained blind to the meaning-making complexity (i.e., ways of knowing), as determined by the SOI scores and the content of the SOI data, until after I conducted these two rounds of interviews and completed initial analysis of the data in pursuit of my first two research questions. I did not learn participants’ ways of knowing until the third phase of data analysis (see below). My goal with this part of my research design was to allow myself to examine the participants’ experiences first *without* specific developmental information applied to my initial
findings. If I knew the results of the SOI beforehand, it could have biased my understanding of the participant’s meaning making in the two interviews I conducted. See below for further explanation of when and how I added the SOI/way of knowing assessments to my analysis.

I feel it is important to note that I completed my data collection by February of 2020, just weeks before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that swept through the United States and the world, and so there is no mention in my study about school leadership during the pandemic. Had I interviewed the participants of the study during the pandemic, I am sure that the new challenges of leading schools during remote and hybrid learning would have featured prominently in what these participants would have shared.

**Subject-Object Interview**

The Subject-Object Interview (SOI) is a psychological interview used to assess a person’s developmental level (i.e., one’s way of knowing) according to Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000; Lahey et al., 1988, 2011). It is an academic research tool designed to measure an individual’s mental complexity. The interview takes about one hour and is conversational in nature. It is conducted by a trained certified interviewer and is assessed by a SOI scorer. I used the SOI in conjunction with the qualitative interviews I conducted to better understand the similarities and differences that exist among leaders who share a particular way of knowing. Because my third research question focused on understanding how a new principal’s developmental capacity (way of knowing) might impact how they make sense of professional learning opportunities, it was crucial that I had participants that had various ways of knowing. According to constructive-developmental theory there are four ways of knowing in adulthood—instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming. The first three are more prevalent in adulthood and the forth, self-transforming, is becoming more
prevalent because of the complexities and demands of the contemporary world (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018a; Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008; Kegan, 1994, 2000; Kegan & Lahey, 2009, 2016). In this study I included principals from within that range, focusing specifically on participants who were predominately socializing and predominately self-authoring.

In order to remain blind to the developmental score during the two qualitative interviews that I conducted with each participant, I hired Dr. Nancy Popp, a certified SOI interviewer and scorer and developmental expert to conduct the SOI (developmental assessment). From the results of this developmental assessment, she selected a group of eight participants that met my developmental criteria: four who are predominantly socializing in their way of knowing and four who are predominantly self-authoring.

**Semi-Structured Substantive Interviews**

I conducted two semi-structured qualitative interviews (90 minutes, each) with each participant (Maxwell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews present the benefit of allowing balance between free flow and directed conversation (Lee, 1999). See below for further explanation of when and subjects as they emerge during the interview (Lee, 1999).

These two interviews, which I conducted, were aligned with my first and second research questions. The interview followed a semi-structured interview protocol, designed specifically to understand the themes identified in my literature review and resulting conceptual framework. The purpose of the first interview was to gather information to help me understand the overall experiences of the participant’s transition from assistant principal to principal, supports that were helpful in that transition, as well as their hopes and desires for additional supports (see Appendix A).
Approximately one month after the completion of the first-round qualitative interviews and initial data analysis, I conducted a ninety-minute follow-up interview with each participant (See Appendix E for research timeline). I analyzed interview transcripts to be prepared with follow up on interpretations [i.e., member checking, Maxwell (2005)], remaining questions, and probing questions to understand better their thinking and encourage richer and deeper understanding during second interview. This provided me the opportunity to further narrow the focus, to check emerging interpretations with each participant and to incorporate their interpretations of them (see Appendix B Interview 2 Protocol). I asked them questions about my emerging findings to see if it fit with their experiences and if they thought it fit the experiences of other new and transitioning principals that they know of. They shared that—for the most part—their experiences were aligned to what they thought other new principals around them had experienced.

Data Analysis

As I describe in detail in Chapter III, data analysis involved a number of key steps, which I approached as a systematic, iterative process (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2014; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). These steps included:

1. Writing analytic notes and memos after interviews to capture my initial connections, reflections, and reactions (Maxwell, 2013);

2. Transcribing interviews via a third-party and then reading back each transcript against the audio recording to check the accuracy of the transcript and to attend to descriptive validity (Maxwell, 2013);

3. Using open, or descriptive, coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to highlight the participants’ voice and potentially bring forth ideas or explanations that are
contrary to my assumptions or the current literature (interpretative validity, Maxwell, 2005);

4. Categorizing data by codes and then larger themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) as well as connecting data (Maxwell & Miller, 2008);

5. Crafting narrative summaries (Maxwell, 2013) and participant profiles (Seidman, 1998, 2006);

6. Building and analyzing within-case and cross-case matrices (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) so that I can develop an understanding of principals’ perceptions and understanding of their transition from assistant principal to principal, as well as how ways of knowing can provide insight into understanding these principals’ experiences of this transition.

To respond to my three research questions, I used a three-step data analysis: analyze data from my in-depth interviews, then get the results from SOI assessments, and finally cross-analyze data from those two sources.

Validity

I recognize that there exist many different ways that this collected data could have been interpreted, and that my personal interest in this topic may have had an effect on how I derived meaning from it (Maxwell, 2005). My experiences as a principal and superintendent, and my interactions with my supervisors and with the principals and assistant principals that I mentor, all shape my perspective. I believed that my personal and professional experiences would likely help participants feel more connected to their interviewer and perhaps more likely to share their struggles and challenges. At the same time, I acknowledge that my experiences could have also created biases and assumptions about leadership roles and transitions. Therefore, I attended to
validity threats (e.g., researcher bias and reactivity, descriptive validity, interpretive validity, and theoretical validity) throughout my research. Further information on the steps that I followed to attend to validity threats are described briefly below and in detail in Chapter III.

**Reactivity**

In order to address possible research reactivity, I provided participants with a clear description of the purpose of the study and how I intended to use the research (IRB protocols). I believed it was important for the participants in this project to know my background as a current school leader in New York City. I included a brief summary of my background as the researcher in the invite letters. By being direct with the participants about my role, what I hope to learn, and the care for their anonymity, and asking them about this, it was my hope that these steps would help address issues of researcher bias and reactivity in the interviews.

In the invitation letters I sent and at the beginning of the interviews, I also clearly described how I would attend to confidentiality interviews (by changing or deleting any identifying information, including names of participants and schools). After the interviews I wrote analytic memos (Maxwell, 2005) to reflect on how I might have influenced the interviews.

**Researcher Bias**

As a researcher, it is important that I am aware of my assumptions and biases that might have influenced my data collection, data analysis and my writing of my dissertation. Given my experiences as in the Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College and my familiarity with adult developmental theory, I was likely more conscious of the developmental needs of assistant principals and principals than someone who had otherwise not been exposed to these theories. I have spent many years as a school leader with this as my primary lens and this experience certainly impacted how I led professional development and how I go about mentoring assistant
principals. My experience working in an alternative school, where all of our students have struggled in their previous school, also helped me see the importance of openly looking for and embracing the strengths rather than the flaws of each individual. I strongly believe in creating deliberatively developmental learning environments where our students, and our staff members, are able to grow. As such, I acknowledge that I entered into the participant interviews with some of my own biases.

In order to help mitigate some of this bias, I framed my interview request as a genuine invitation to learn about my participants experiences, as opposed to judging or evaluating their experiences. I also believe that initiating the interview process with a Subject-Object Interview that was done by an expert researcher helped show my interest in who they were as adult learners and helped alleviate some of their anxiety. I also developed my first interview protocol with these assumptions in mind. Specifically, I was careful to avoid any leading questions as well as anything that presumes background knowledge of adult development theories. My classmates in research seminar convenings at Teachers College helped me be mindful of these assumptions and to guard against them from coloring my coding and analysis.

While it is impossible for me to eliminate my biases, by being aware of them and monitoring them, I sought to improve the quality of my data collection, and improve the validity of my study (Maxwell, 2005).

Validity Summary

By using member checks, cross-checking, triangulation, memoing, transcript review, interview protocols and working with other doctoral students trained in qualitative research, among many other strategies, I did my best to maximize the internal generalizability of this study
(Maxwell, 2005). Ultimately I hoped to be able to develop findings that might be relevant to other urban public school districts across United States.

**Personal Interest**

My interest in this topic became clear as I reflected on my own experiences as a new principal eleven years ago and my trajectory into the principalship.

In response to the teacher shortage crisis in the 1990s, programs like Teach for America and New York City Teaching Fellows were established to provide a fast-track for some candidates into teaching positions. These programs have been criticized for placing novice teachers in some of the most challenging schools, all without the usual teacher preparation experience (Ravitch, 2013). Similarly, programs like the New York City Leadership Academy were established a decade later, to provide a fast-track to staff difficult-to-fill principal positions at a time when dozens of new schools were being opened each year. These programs eschewed the traditional graduate school education leadership curriculum and expected their candidates to immediately take on school principal roles without necessarily first serving as teacher leaders or assistant principals (Johnston et al., 2010). These types of programs can be tempting for those considering going into to teaching and into school leadership because they take less time than traditional certification routes, and are often partially or fully subsidized – lowering the barrier of entry into education and education leadership.

I strongly considered Teach for America and the New York City Teaching Fellows program when I sought to enter the teaching profession, but eventually enrolled in a more traditional teacher certification program at Teachers College, Columbia University. The key determining factor *for me* was my desire to have the student teaching experience. I wanted to make sure that I had the opportunity to learn alongside more experienced teachers and eventually
be able to apply to work at a school that would be a good fit for me – one that was considerate of my own learning style and that could nurture me professionally and help me grow as a new teacher. Looking back now, those first few years were teaching were challenging, but I also felt supported. I believe that I owe my initial success as a teacher to taking that more deliberate and considered route.

When I was encouraged to take on a school leadership role, I once again eschewed the fast-track approach and enrolled in another program at Teachers College instead of the NYC Leadership Academy. Through the Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College, I received thoughtful mentoring and coaching that helped me to navigate my internship year and continued to help me through my initial experiences as an assistant principal and my transition to the principalship. The deliberate nature of my training and the adjustments that my mentors and supervisors made when I was an assistant principal truly helped me to feel that I could be successful as a school leader and that when I eventually would became a principal, that I would not be alone.

I recognize that my experience as an assistant principal may be a rare one. It was clear to me that my principal (i.e., my supervisor/boss) and my mentor both were deliberate in creating learning experiences to support my growth into a strong assistant principal while also readying me for the principalship. Many of classmates in my principal certification program, on the other hand, did not all have the advantages of such learning experiences. Some of them felt that they did not have a future in their schools because their principals felt threatened by their presence. Some took on assistant principal roles, only to realize that they were constantly tasked with logistical responsibilities while being left to their own devices – without the support for their professional growth that I had been given.
Having served as an assistant principal, I understand how the role can be both isolating and liberating. Depending on the size of the school and how the school leadership team divides responsibilities, assistant principals can work side by side with their principals and other school leaders to co-facilitate the growth of teachers and to collaborate on important decisions. Alternatively, assistant principals can be stuck taking care of the managerial tasks in isolation. If in the latter kind of assistance principalship, no amount of experience will fully prepare an assistant principal for the principalship.

I worked for eight years as a high school principal. Through the years, I have realized that the most important role I hold in my school is that of facilitator and supporter of adult learning. I felt a great sense of responsibility to mentor and support the assistant principals who work under me, as well as other new leaders at other schools. In my last few years as principal, I was proudest of my school’s commitment to adult growth and learning. Furthermore, I feel that I have learned a great deal by mentoring and supporting other teachers and school leaders; they have helped expand my own perspective and given me greater appreciation for the work they lead.

During this research project, I spent more time than ever working alongside my superintendent’s team to think through principal supervision and support. I participate in monthly workshops alongside my superintendent, as part of the Wallace Foundation Principal Supervisor Initiative. This gave me initial exposure to the work of the superintendents, as it pertains to supervising and supporting school leaders. As part of that work, we piloted a portfolio review process for principals that allows them to get feedback from each other. I also led a professional learning community for other principals on the theory and practice of providing
feedback for teacher growth. I also mentored two new principals in our district – visiting them regularly and providing coaching support to them.

Just as I finished working on my initial dissertation proposal, I was promoted to the role of Deputy High School Superintendent in the New York City Department of Education. This role allowed me to supervise and support 40 high school principals. It was a natural extension of the principal leadership work I had been doing and I was excited about this new position. Since the research proposal, I was promoted from Deputy Superintendent to Superintendent and now supervise 48 schools in the New York City Department of Education.

I was interested in the topic of assistant principal-to-principal transition because I strongly believe that successful schools need well supported principals. I believe that cultivating and supporting principals is one of the most important responsibilities of superintendents and of school districts. Depending on heroic-but-novice principals is not a sustainable solution, and certainly not a sustainable one. I believe that there is much to be learned about best practices for supporting new school leaders, especially about how taking into account their learning styles and developmental needs can lead to better support for them. It would be helpful for school districts, and for APs supervisors (i.e., their school principals) to better understand of the kinds of supports that are most relevant and necessary to develop people to become principals.

**Implications and Significance of this Study**

This study is important because the success of our school leaders is crucial to the success of our schools (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Goldring et al., 2014; Mitgang, 2012). The role of the principalship can feel overwhelming and unsustainable, especially with the increased responsibility for both managing the building and leading the staff, (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Drago-Severson, 2012, 2016). When schools lose
their principal due to turnover, the students were more likely to perform poorly in the subsequent year (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Mitgang, 2012). As such, school districts have recognized the importance of having robust plans for training and supporting their school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Gill, 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Honig, 2012). A key aspect of this is aimed at supporting those assistant principals who aspire to become school principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). With deliberate and individualized support, hundreds or even thousands of them can have a future as successful school principals.

For many of the principals, their prior experiences as assistant principals may have helped developed necessary leadership skills and have helped shape their perspectives on the role of leaders (Barnett, et al., 2017; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Gates et al., 2014; Grissom et al., 2021; Milkesa et al., 2014; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). Their expectations of leadership learning opportunities, like coaching or career shadowing, will be different depending on their ways of knowing (Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011).

It is important that we gain a better understanding of how these assistant principals experienced and made meaning of the various professional learning opportunities. This understanding can potentially help school district leaders—superintendents and principals—provide differentiated supports for their aspiring school principals. The data taken together can give a fuller picture of their learning experiences and potential provide with a broader and richer picture of their lives. This understanding can also help me better support the difficult and challenging lives of school principals, including the ones that I mentor and coach each year. Our schools and our school districts have the potential to be fertile and rich learning environments for not only the students who attend the schools but also for the adults as well.
Organization of this Dissertation

In Chapter I, I have presented the research problem, my study’s purpose, my research questions, the nature of my interest in this subject, and my conceptual framework. I also included an overview of the research design.

In Chapter II, I provide a literature review of the topics relevant to my study. I begin with the recent history of changes to the roles and expectations of assistant principals and principals. Next, I discuss the current challenges for filling the principal pipeline and. With this background, I point out gaps in literature relevant to this study, specifically the missing voice of principals who have recently transitioned from assistant principal to principal. I then discuss this background in relation adult development theory, specifically the constructive-development theory as defined by Kegan (1982, 1994) and Drago-Severson (2004b, 2009). I also review the literature around professional learning opportunities – including the importance of both formal and informal learning as well as the continuum between self-directed learning to externally-motivated learning. Finally, I explain how these adult development theories may explain how different principals in transition make sense of leadership supports in this time of change.

In Chapter III, I discuss the methodology I employ in this study. I discuss my data collection methods, analytic procedures, and point to validity threats as well as how I attend to them. Then in Chapter IV, I offer rich descriptions of the eight participants in my study, complete with details about their professional history, school context, and the participant’s way of knowing at the time of our interviews.

Chapters V and VI contain the findings that arose from my analysis of the data I collected. In Chapter V, I share what I found in light of my first and third research questions, describing the experience of each participant in transitioning from assistant principal to principal
and analyzing patterns among the data according to the individual way of knowing of each participant. In Chapter VI, I share what I found in light of my second and third research questions, describing the professional learning experiences that each participant named as helpful, or said would have been helpful in retrospect, and then again analyzing patterns among the data according to the individual way of knowing of each participant.

In Chapter VII, I conclude my dissertation by summarizing my findings, identifying the limitations on my study, and then discussing the implications for practitioners and for future research.
Chapter II
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review previous studies that inform my research. This review develops a framework that informed my research questions, and, in turn, both my research strategy and my interview protocol. My literature review focuses on two main bodies of research.

In the first body of research, I focus on the role of the principals and assistant principals in our public schools. I begin by presenting literature that shows how the role of principals and assistant principals have changed over time and how the increased emphasis on instructional leadership has affected our expectations of our school leaders. Next, I present the current data on principal retention and turnover and the impact of high principal turnover has on schools. I connect evidence that shows that in the current era of high-stakes accountability and school reform, the longevity of many school leaders has been abbreviated (Fuller & Young, 2009). I present the current research on assistant principals and their transition to the principalship. For the final part of this section, I review the literature on professional development for principals with a focus on leadership supports for new principals, and on support assistant principals who then become principals.

The second strand of my literature review brings in the perspective of adult development as it relates to leadership preparation. I begin by examining the existing literature that underlie adult development theory, what transformative learning is, and how it is best developed in adults. I focus on how Robert Kegan definitions of constructive-developmental theory and Ellie Drago-Severson’s definitions of ways of knowing help us understand the stages of adult development as it relates to schools, school leaders, and professional development. Next, I provide a detailed description of two different ways of knowing: socializing and self-authorizing, and how leaders
who fit these particular orientations receive challenges and supports. The literature in this field helps us understand ways that we can be deliberate in aligning the right kinds of professional development to an individual’s way of knowing.

The literature shows that certain kinds of positions – including leadership positions – do call for the ability to demonstrate more complex developmental capacities (Drago-Severson, 2009). For example, leaders must be able to understand other adults’ perspectives simultaneously having the capacity to hold onto their own perspectives (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). My study concentrates on socializing and self-authorizing ways of knowing because they are common among novice school leaders. I share how these two ways of knowing are actualized in leaders and how they receive supports and challenges.

I also address the literature about formal and informal professional learning. This is particularly interesting because most of the mandatory professional development for school leaders take the form of formal professional learning. Yet, for many school leaders the informal learning opportunities, often embedded in the classroom or school context, allows participants to reflect on their practice and to learn from their colleagues. In my study, this idea of considering both formal and informal professional learning opportunities for assistant principals who are now principals is particularly important because research shows that adults describe and understand these learning opportunities differently (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Desimone et al., 2014; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Richter et al., 2011).

In the final part of my review I connect the literature and show how adult development theory and formal and informal learning have been used to inform the design of professional development programs for teacher leaders, and school principals.
The Changing Roles of Principals and Assistant Principals

The roles of principals have changed dramatically over the last several decades (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Armstrong, 2015; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Drago-Severson, 2014; Oleszwiski, 2012). In the public’s mind, school principals have often been thought of as mere school-building managers – whose job is to enforce the rules, determine the discipline, and lead the school assemblies (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; MetLife, 2013). However, the demands placed upon principals have changed significantly – teacher-evaluation and school-accountability systems have led principals to develop new competencies largely centered around quantitative data, curriculum, pedagogy, and human development (Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; MetLife 2013). These new models of teacher evaluation have dramatically changed the amount of time principals spend observing and conferencing with teachers and they have also altered the nature of their interactions with teachers (Burkhauser et al., 2012). These increased responsibilities have come been added to traditional managerial demands (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; MetLife, 2013).

With the increased responsibility for both managing the building and leading the staff, the role of the principalship can feel overwhelming and unsustainable (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Drago-Severson, 2012; McKibben, 2013). Principals, now more than ever, focus on student achievement while still retaining their traditional administrative and building manager duties (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007; MetLife, 2013). Because of this, principals typically work 10-hour days and many believe the job is just not doable as it is configured now (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond & Orphanos, 2007). In a 2011 survey of American educators, 75% reported that they felt that their jobs are too complex and have led to high levels.
of stress and low job satisfaction, while almost 70 percent of principals reported that their job responsibilities are much different than they were just five years before, and 75 percent of those reported that their jobs are too complex and have led to higher levels of stress and less job satisfaction (MetLife, 2013).

Principals’ roles are diverse. They span activities across managerial, instructional, and political realms (Cuban, 1988), and these varied realms all compete for the principals’ time and attention (Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010). Principal work also tends to be fragmented, fast-paced, and varied; it involves long hours and a relentless workload, along with demands from multiple, diverse stakeholders (Lortie, 2009; MacBeath et al., 2009). Together, these conditions contribute to high levels of stress (Lindle, 2004; Thomson, 2009) and burnout (Friedman, 2002) among principals (Grissom et al., 2021).

Additionally, working in a school can be an isolated, insular experience. Many educators rarely venture beyond their own school walls, and networking opportunities are slim (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Cocoran et al., 2012). They seldom have extended time to engage in collegial discussions around best practices and improvement strategies (Drago-Severson, 2011). Many researchers how theorized that the increasing complexity of the role over time has led to a hidden curriculum that has asked more and more, developmentally, of principals (Daloz, 2000; Drago-Severson, 2011; Heifetz & Linsky, 2009, 2017).

The Challenges of Principal Turnover

A 2014 study of costs of principal turnover, by The School Leaders Network, reported that 20% of newly minted principals left their positions within two years. Moreover, schools that lost principals were more likely to perform poorly the subsequent year (Burkhauser et al., 2012;
Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Mitgang, 2012). These findings indicate that a lack of continuity in leadership bodes poorly for schools and underscore the importance of districts having well-designed plans for recruitment, training, and ongoing support of their principals. The Wallace Foundation released a report in February of 2021 that showed the impact of principal turnover and the importance of well-planned leadership transitions of assistant principals to principals (Grissom et al., 2021).

As districts consider strategies to improve the leadership pipeline, they have looked to their existing teacher leaders and assistant principals (Burkhauser et al., 2012; McKibben, 2013; Mitgang, 2012; Spillane et al., 2015). The role of assistant principal is a logical stepping-stone for those who want to eventually become school principals (Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Oleszewski et al., 2012). However, a 2013 Bain Leadership Study found that in many cases there is not a clear definition of which skills must be developed while assistant principals prepare for the principalship (Bierly, 2013). This Bain Leadership Study surveyed 4200 principals, assistant principals, and teachers in seven urban school districts and five charter management organizations. The study also found an absence of consistent structures to ensure appropriate learning experiences support AP’s development of the skills and capacities they will need as principals (Bierly, 2013). As I describe in more detail next section, the inconsistency of their professional learning experiences as assistant principals combined with different ways of knowing may lead to significant differences in how new principals are prepared their new roles and how they make sense of the preparation.

Teachers become more effective with experience and with supports and challenges aimed at facilitating their growth, and so do principals, especially in their first three years (Clark, Martorell & Rockoff, 2009; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). Principals need
deliberate supports and challenges so that they can grow. Furthermore, no matter how effective a principal was at his or her previous school, or whether they are a new or experienced principal, when he or she transfers to a new school it takes approximately five years to fully stabilize and improve the teaching staff as well as fully implement policies and practices to positively impact the school’s performance (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Effective principals still make significant improvements in their first few years; however, their effectiveness increases over time (Grissom et al., 2021; Milkesa et al., 2014; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Yet the average length of a principal’s tenure is six to seven for the average school (Grissom et al., 2021; Milkesa et al., 2014; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). In the highest poverty schools, the average tenure is even shorter at below six years. Given these statistics, it can be extremely valuable to consider ways to support assistant principals who become new principals so that the first few years of the principalship can be more successful and so that these new leaders can sustain their work. It is my hope that my study will help us understand the experiences of some of those newer principals in transition during their first two years of the principalship that we may be able to do a better job of supporting these school leaders with what Drago-Severson refers to as developmental intentionality (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016).

**Principal Retention and Turnover**

Most research on novice principals in the United States predates the institutionalization of standards and test-based high-stakes accountability—policy changes that target low-performing urban school systems in particular. Several scholars argue that, with the emergence of a high-stakes accountability policy environment in the United States and elsewhere, the demands on school principals have changed, altering the expectations that newcomers bring to the role and encounter from others (Lortie, 2009; Thomson, 2009; Tucker & Codding, 2002; Usdan,
McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000). In particular, those who become principals in large, urban districts in this era of accountability likely face an especially daunting transition.

A recent Wallace Foundation meta-analysis (2021) showed that the principalship has become more female, the average tenure of principals has fallen, especially for high-needs schools, and principal racial/ethnic diversity has changed slowly, despite dramatic changes for students (Grissom et al., 2021). The meta-analysis also showed that there was high-quality studies that used longitudinal data to show that an effective principal contributes substantially to student achievement and can also affect student absenteeism, teacher job satisfaction and teacher turnover (Grissom et al., 2021).

Abundant anecdotal evidence reveals that principals regularly grapple with demands to lay on new responsibilities not readily seen as related to teaching and learning. They report an erosion of their authority to effect change in their organizations, escalating expectations for accountability, lack of support, compensation that is not commensurate with their responsibilities and a pervasively stressful political environment for school leaders (Adams, 1999). These are among the factors that are dissuading those freshly certified principals from applying and causing practicing principals to consider leaving the field entirely or to request classroom teaching assignments.

In the current era of high-stakes accountability and school reform, the longevity of many school leaders has been abbreviated (Bartanen, et al., 2019; Fuller & Young, 2009; McKibben, 2013; Peters-Hawkins, et al., 2018). These rapid changes in leadership leave the organization in an uncertain, unstable state. These new schools are especially vulnerable to fluctuations in leadership. Management literature has shown that organizational stability is a key component of

This research has also shown that although gains in student achievement temporarily slow whenever there is a new principal, the impact is felt more at the most challenging schools. In these schools, the new principal is more likely to have less experience and be less effective than a new principal at a less challenging school, often resulting in a longer, more pronounced slowdown of achievement gains. The reason for the staffing difference is that many principals gain their initial experience at challenging schools, then transfer to easier-to-manage schools as those positions open up. A study of one large urban district found that principals’ second or third schools typically enrolled 89 percent fewer poor and minority students than their first position (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

While annual turnover rates for principals range between 15 and 30%, similar to turnover rates of managers in other professions, turnover rates at more challenging schools are on the higher end of that spectrum (Beteille, Kalogrides & Loeb 2011, Boyd, et al. 2008, Clark, Martorell & Rockoff 2009; Grissom et al., 2021). For example, the principal turnover rate in Miami Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) is 22%, similar to that found in other large urban districts such as Milwaukee (20%), San Francisco (26%) and New York City (24%). However, within MDCPS the turnover rate rises to 28% for the district’s highest-poverty schools, compared to an 18% turnover rate in their lowest-poverty schools (Beteille, Kalogrides & Loeb, 2011). Similar results were found examining New York City schools (Clark, Martorell & Rockoff, 2009). And when challenging schools lose an effective principal, that principal is likely to be replaced by a less-experienced and less-effective principal (Beteille, Kalogrides & Loeb, 2011; Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012).
Assistant Principals and the School Leadership Pipeline

As a growing number of principals retire or leave the position, the need for a new generation of principals who can positively influence a school and provide instructional leadership is paramount. School of education and school districts have recognized the need for strong leaders and have developed leadership pipelines that train and certify school leaders. However, researchers have consistently decried the low quality of educational administration programs in the country (Barnett et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Davis et al., 2017; Levine, 2005; Louis et al., 2010; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018).

Despite the number of credentialed administrators, states and local educational authorities are finding it difficult to recruit the school leaders they need, especially in the highest-need schools. This challenge is driven in part by the limitations of current preparation programs, many of which do not provide authentic residency experiences to prospective leaders (Barnett et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Davis et al., 2017; Levine, 2005; Louis et al., 2010; New Leaders, 2009; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). One source for replacing principals was assistant principals (APs), who serve as a steppingstone to the principalship (Barnett, et al., 2017; Daresh & Voss, 2001; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Grissom et al., 2021; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012).

In my experience working with several superintendents and district leaders, it seems that most schools and school districts would much prefer to fill school principal positions with those that have previous experience in school leadership (as assistant principals or as principals). The school leaders I have worked with say that developing assistant principals (APs) is a key step in ensuring a strong school leadership. The role of an AP is a logical stepping-stone for those who want to become school principals (Barnett, et al., 2017; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011;
Grissom et al., 2021; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012). However, not enough is known about how to support assistant principals their transition to becoming principals.

In most districts, the leadership pipeline is dependent on identifying and developing strong teachers to become assistant principals and then supporting those assistant principals in becoming principals (Wallace Foundation, 2016). The assistant principal role should be a vital link between the principal and teachers, parents and students but often times the responsibilities are ambiguous, and ill-defined. The keys to building a strong AP bench are to set a high bar for these roles, create a clear and standardized set of job expectations, and put in place robust systems to assess and monitor talent (Wallace Foundation, 2016, 2021). As with teacher leaders, few districts have established clear AP competency criteria and charged principals with ensuring their successful development (Bierly, 2013)

Without a clear definition of which skills must be developed and a consistent set of roles that are structured to provide those experiences, leadership development of assistant principals becomes catch-as-catch-can. In most cases, that means it gets pushed aside by more immediate priorities. Absent a longer-term perspective on how principals can contribute to retaining and developing potential leaders, there is a natural tendency to define these positions too narrowly. Research shows that principals tend to take a short-term view of AP roles, designing them around those tasks they least prefer to do (Barnett et al., 2017; Bierly, 2013; Davis et al., 2017; Morgan, 2018; Yan 2020).

**Professional Development for School Leaders**

Given the changing roles of the principalship and the challenges of increased principal turnover, it is critical that school districts have robust structures in place to be able to support new principals.
Leadership Support for New Principals

As new principal recruits assume positions of principal, the difficulty of the job often proves overwhelming (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Drago-Severson, 2012). Principals do not feel sufficiently prepared by their preservice training to successfully meet the demands of school leadership (Cocoran et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Drago-Severson, 2016; McKibben, 2013).

Many articles cite coaching as a positive way of supporting new principals when they start their jobs. In “Fit for the Principalship: Identifying, Training, and Clearing the Path for Potential School Leaders,” Mike Johnston, R.K. Walker, and Andy Levine of New Leaders for New Schools (2012) report the findings of a study of the leadership factors in New Leaders-led schools making breakthrough student-achievement gains as well as the system in place to bring these qualities to more and more principalships in urban areas. They document the work of New Leaders for New Schools stressing the importance of aggressive recruiting, careful selection, an intense summer program, a full-year internship with an experienced and successful mentor principal, and at least two years of personal coaching.

In a report on leadership development in California, Stanford University researchers Linda Darling-Hammond and Stelios Orphanos (2007) note that many are criticizing California’s principal training program for “its brevity, its one-size-fits-all nature, and the fact that it generally does not include direct mentoring or coaching of principals” (p. 2). Their research provides a glimpse of how other states have approached the problem of connecting knowledge with practice. According to the researchers, California principals are “much less likely” than their counterparts in other states to “have access to mentoring and coaching in their work.” States such as Kentucky, Georgia, and Delaware have made coaching a central part of their efforts.
There are also some examples of University-district partnerships. The University of South Carolina and the local school districts have worked together to build the Leadership Pipeline Initiative (Lindsay, 2008). Participants in this cohort mode receive personal counseling and support from a number of people in their home school districts, and mentor principals are selected carefully to guide practicum experiences. The partnership has highlighted significant academic and personal benefits of being a member of a group with a shared learning experience.

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) also has a system in place in conjunction with the University of Chicago to support coaching of future principals (Chicago Public Education Fund, 2016). Waves of principal retirements have hit Chicago Public Schools in recent years where there were more than 100 principal vacancies at the end of 2010, with more expected in future years. CPS has received acknowledgement for its principal mentoring program and has tried to steer many resources into that initiative. Many principals note that guidance from the mentor principal was far more valuable than any other training they received (Forte, 2010). In 2016, 119 Chicago Public Schools started the school year with a new principal and had at least 37 schools who had their second or third transition in four years (CPS, 2016).

In an article in Principal Leadership, Kathryn Whitaker, a Professor at the University of Northern Colorado at Greeley discusses the Denver Metro Cohort model (Whitaker, 2006). The partnership was formed in 1998 by the University of Northern Colorado and includes three metro-area school districts. The districts have been able to increase their applicant pools for administrative positions and they get to know participating teachers throughout the two-year program. The program includes a two-year internship with mentor principals in conjunction with coursework. The assigned mentor is usually the principal with whom he or she works. These
mentors, in turn, are able to provide district-level leadership with input on the strongest administrative candidates.

Supporting Assistant Principals Who Become Principals

School districts have recognized the importance of having robust plans for training and supporting their current and aspiring school leaders (Barnett et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Gill, 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Honig, 2012). A key aspect of this is aimed at supporting those assistant principals who aspire to become school principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016; Hayes & Burkett, 2020).

Scholars have examined the role of assistant principals and have shown that while the role of assistant principal can be a logical stepping-stone for those who want to eventually become principals, the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals are frequently different across so schools so their ability to make use of those learning opportunities are uneven (Barnett, et al., 2017; Drago-Severson & Alvarana, 2011; Grissom et al., 2021; Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Morgan, 2018; Oleszewski, Shoho, & Barnett, 2012).

Unfortunately, leadership development for assistant principals often becomes catch-as-catch-can and – in most cases – and as a result the leadership development for assistant principals frequently gets pushed aside for more urgent priorities (Barnett et al., 2017; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Within districts, there are a variety of professional learning opportunities that are available to help assistant principals learn how to navigate the complex and difficult work of leading schools (Barnett et al., 2017; Corcoran et al., 2012; Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Morgan, 2018; Oleszewski, 2012). For example, some districts have mandatory professional development workshops for new assistant
principals. In large districts with administrator unions, those organizations may also offer
optional workshops. However, the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals are frequently
different across schools so their ability to make use of these learning opportunities is uneven
(Barnett et al., 2017; Corcoran et al., 2012; Hayes & Burkett, 2020; Oleszewski, 2012).

Additionally, adult learners, including principals and assistant principals, have different
*ways of knowing* that influence the kinds of supports that are helpful in growing their internal
capacities to understand the world and to manage the complex challenges they encounter in their
leadership (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2016). Adult development theory can inform the
growth of assistant school principals as they transition to principals (Drago-Severson, 2009,
2011, 2012, 2016). However, we do not know much about the experiences of assistant principals
*as they transition to their new roles as principals*. My research is an attempt to investigate and
better understand how these assistant principals experienced and make meaning of the various
professional learning opportunities. This understanding may potentially help school district
leaders – superintendents, and principals – provide differentiated supports for their aspiring
school principals. This is a gap that my research aims to address.

**Adult Development**

In order to better understand how adults make meaning and develop over time, I ground
my literature in Kegan’s (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory, and Drago-Severson’s
theoretical framework builds on 40 years of research on development in adults (Belenky et al.,

Among the most contemporary developmental theorist is Drago-Severson. Her work has
extended earlier theorist and has been applied directly to the field of education and education leadership. She has researched adult learning and adult development extensively with teachers, assistant principals, principals, and superintendents (2004b, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2016). Drago-Severson (2004b, 2009) points to the importance of understanding a person’s way of knowing in order to inform how to employ particular practices (e.g., pillar practices) to support his or her growth. She has studied how individuals in the workplace made sense of their learning (Drago-Severson, 2004a), how principals met the development needs of teachers (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2013), how participants in a transformational leadership course applied principles of adult development and practices for supporting growth (Drago-Severson et al., 2013). She has captured ideas of leading adult learning and leadership development (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012, 2016) and the importance of the core self, looking after one’s own development and how it affects one’s ability to lead others as they grow and develop in order to better support student learning (Drago-Severson, 2012).

Below, I will summarize how this literature applies to my research sample.

**Informational and Transformational Learning**

Adult learning is critical to helping leaders develop capacities to make sense of themselves and others. Drago-Severson (2004b, 2009, 2012) identifies two different types of learning, beginning with informational learning, which helps leaders with technical challenges such as focusing on increasing skills and knowledge. A different type of learning, transformational learning, helps adults deal with the many adaptive challenges they inevitably face.

Adaptive challenges are problems where there is no clear solution or system for resolution in the current context (Heifetz, 1994, 2009). These challenges require new learning
with the engagement of stakeholders, not only to solve the problem but also even to define the problem (Heifetz, 1994, 2009). This kind of engagement requires understanding how adult learning and development helps stakeholders to understand new contexts and to co-construct solutions to problems. As Drago-Severson (2009) notes:

Without the appropriate tools and supports needed to meet such challenges, many principals, superintendents, and teachers leave their professions for more supportive environments (Donaldson, 2008; Moller & Pankake, 2006; Murphy, 2006; Teitel, 2006). The use of effective support models for leadership development in schools helps us build our cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities. Increasing these capacities can make the difference in adaptively addressing complex challenges. (p. 7)

Drago-Severson (2009) describes Informational learning as increasing “the amount of knowledge and skills a person possesses” (p. 11) and transformational learning as “relat[ing] to the development of the cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities that enable a person to manage the complexities of work.” (p. 11) Transformational learning is the kind of learning—that focuses on internal growth—necessary to help leaders of all kinds manage the adaptive challenges they encounter, since it involves changes in “how a person actively interprets, organizes, understands, and makes sense of his or her experience.” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 11)

Other constructive-developmental theorists such as Belenky (1986), Daloz (1999, 2000), and Kegan (1982, 1994), embrace the concept of transformation as a socially-constructed enterprise. Kegan (2000) directly supported Mezirow’s definition of transformation, noting that:

Transformational kinds of learning need to be more clearly distinguished from informational kinds of learning... genuinely transformational learning is always to some extent an epistemological change rather than merely a change in behavioral repertoire or increases in the quantity or fund of knowledge. (pp. 47-8)

In my personal experience, the leadership preparation I received as an assistant principal and in my first year as a principal was primarily informational learning—how do I meet compliance requirements, who do I go to legal questions, where can I find answers to my
budgeting questions. While those were valuable, I believe that successful schools and school systems must incorporate opportunities for both informational and transformational learning. Above, I highlighted some of the challenges and changing expectations placed upon school principals. The shift from being managers to instructional leaders has also placed new and increasingly complex demands on principals. More specifically, districts are asking them to adapt from a chiefly managerial role (scheduling, budgeting, and imposing discipline) to being a school’s primary adult developer and architect of the collaborative learning community (Samuels, 2008). Given the challenges and the expectations, transformational learning opportunities are critical to helping principals deal with the many adaptive challenges that schools are now encountering.

**Constructive-Developmental Theory**

Supports for school leaders need to not only take into account what kinds of learning that needs to happen – informational learning versus transformational learning – but also the unique developmental needs for the person that is doing the learning. Adults do not all learn the same way, and a better understanding of these adult developmental theories is crucial to providing personalized support that is most appropriate for the individual.

Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994, 2000) constructive-developmental theory is a lifespan stage theory built on the idea that development does not stop once an individual reaches adulthood. Like children, adults can continue to grow and evolve in their capacities to understand and manage complexity in their daily lives. Kegan identifies five Orders of Mind (1982), each defined by a particular meaning-making system that is qualitatively different from and more complex than the one that preceded it, effectively constituting a developmental continuum. Additionally, Kegan argues that for adults to continue to grow, or move along the developmental
continuum, they need to be exposed to different forms of support and challenge (1982, 1994). Kegan’s theory is based on three foundational principles, which Drago-Severson (2009, p. 37) describes in this way:

*Constructivism:* Adults continually work to make meaning of their own experiences and create their own realities through cognitive, emotional, intrapersonal, and interpersonal pathways of development.

*Developmentalism:* In the presence of appropriate supports and challenges, the ways in which adults work to make meaning of their experiences change and grow more complex over time.

*Subject-Object Balance:* The balance between what adults can take a perspective on, or hold as “object,” and what adults are embedded in and cannot see, or are “subject to,” is different for individuals with different meaning-making systems.

The first principle of this theory, constructivism, contends that as adults, through the course of our daily lives, we actively assemble meaning from our experiences. The second principle, developmentalism, is based in the notion that as we continue to grow, our abilities to manage complexity, i.e., make meaning of our experiences in more sophisticated ways, and to hold ambiguity, i.e., live comfortably with uncertainty, also expand. The third principle, subject-object balance, or the relationship between what we can take a perspective on, i.e., we hold as object, and what we are incapable of seeing about ourselves, others, and the link between the two, i.e., we are subject to, serves as the distinguishing marker of each meaning-making system.

What Drago-Severson calls a person’s way of knowing, or meaning-making system, Kegan refers to as an order of consciousness (Kegan, 1994) or a developmental level or stage (Kegan, 1982). Kegan (2000) explains that what Jack Mezirow calls a “frame of reference,” which consists of a habit of mind and a point of view, is essentially a meaning-making system.

Because my research is focused on the developmental differences among the principals, I will describe the various stages of adult development so that it can provide an important context for how the participants made meaning of their experiences.
**Stages of Adult Development**

Kegan’s theory (1982, 1994, 2000) describes in detail the structure in an individual’s meaning-making system at a given point in her development and identifies the differences in individuals’ meaning-making in developmental increments along a continuum. He specifically addresses the enterprise of education for adult learners, from both a constructivist and developmental perspective, in ways that are directly applicable to adult learners’ academic experiences. His theory has been tested for strength and utility across multiple studies of adult meaning-making over two decades and has proven to be useful to adult researchers and educators alike. Because of its robustness and the degree of articulation Kegan offers, his constructive-developmental theory provides a practical lens through which to examine principals’ experiences and their relationship to developmental supports.

While adult development does not follow a strict timetable, Kegan (1982, 1994, 2000) does identify various stages that leaders should take into account. Of the five Orders of Mind on Kegan’s continuum, the First Order describes the meaning-making of small children, and the Fifth Order describes a mostly theoretical stage of development that is rarely seen in any population and never found in people before mid-life (Kegan, Broderick, Drago-Severson, Helsing, Popp, Portnow, & Associates, 2001). Three of these - instrumental, socializing, and self-authoring—are most common in adulthood (Kegan et al., 2001). In essence, second-order, or instrumental knowers possess a concrete orientation to the world and are drawn to defined expectations and specific answers. For third-order, or socializing knowers, their reality is co-constructed, and they define themselves through the approval of important others. Lastly, fourth-order or self-authoring knowers have the capacity not only to generate their own values but also to examine and evaluate their actions against internal standards.
Because the transformation process is a gradual one, most of us are, at any given time, in the process of moving from one order to the next, employing two different systems of making-meaning simultaneously to greater or lesser degrees. Between each distinct order, there are four distinguishable transitional stages, locating with more precision where the individual’s current meaning-making system lies on the continuum. Figure 2.1 illustrates the continuum of the Orders of Mind and transitional stages.

Figure 2.1

*Kegan’s (1982, 1994) Orders of Mind and Transitional Stages Between Orders*

Although there are discrete, broad stages in a person’s development of way of knowing, it is important to note that there are also distinct and identifiable transitional stages (see Drago-Severson, 2004; Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988, 2011). As explained by Drago-Severson (2009 p. 39):

> [a] *way of knowing* is my term for developmental levels that profoundly affect how we as human beings make meaning of experiences and dictates how we make sense of reality. In the context of education, our ways of knowing shapes the way we understand our role and responsibilities as a teacher, principal, superintendent, or learning and the way we think… A person’s way of knowing is not random; it is stable and consistent for a period of time and reflects a coherent system of logic. A way of knowing might feel more like
the way we are rather than something we have (Drago-Severson, 2004a; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kegan et al., 2001a).

It is important to note that certain kinds of positions – including leadership positions – do call for the ability to demonstrate more complex developmental capacities (Drago-Severson, 2009). For example, leaders must be able to understand other adults’ perspectives simultaneously having the capacity to hold onto their own perspectives (Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Given the developmental orientations of the participants in my study, I am most interested in the backgrounds and context of the socializing and self-authoring knowers. I will explain more about each of these two ways of knowing below.

**Socializing way of knowing.** Adults with a predominately socializing way of knowing have an enhanced capacity for reflection. They are able to think about and reflect on their actions, and the actions of others. They can identify with and internalize other people’s feelings. The self is identified by its relationship to valued others or ideas, and the personal constantly seeks approval and acceptance (Kegan, 1982). They have the capacity for empathy and can subordinate her own needs and desires to those of others.

In Drago-Severson’s (2009) description of socializing knowers, they are described as “feeling responsible for other people’s feelings and hold others responsible for their feelings. Interpersonal conflict is experienced as a threat to the self; thus, socializing knowers avoid conflict because it is a risk to the relationship and experienced as a threat to the coherence of a person’s very self.” (p. 45) Table 2.1 summarizes the supports and challenges for socializing knowers.
Table 2.1

Socializing Knowers: Supports and Challenges for Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supports</th>
<th>Challenges (Growing Edge)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure that learner feels known and accepted.</td>
<td>• Provide opportunities to develop own beliefs, becoming less dependent on others’ approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Beliefs are confirmed by authorities.</td>
<td>• Encourage this knower to construct own values and standards, not co-construct them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supervisors are valued colleagues and/or loved ones show acceptance.</td>
<td>• Support the acceptance of conflicting points of view without feeling threatened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide opportunities to share perspectives in pairs or smaller groups before sharing with larger groups.</td>
<td>• Support this knower in separating own feelings and responsibilities from another person’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure that interpersonal relationships are not jeopardized when differences of opinion arise.</td>
<td>• Support this knower in distinguishing own perspective from need to be accepted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Leading Adult Learning: Supporting Adult Development in Our Schools (p 46), by E. Drago-Severson, 2009, Corwin and Learning Forward. Copyright 2009 by Eleanor Drago-Severson.

Self-authoring way of knowing. Adults with a predominately self-authoring way of knowing are able to have their own perspectives on the world as well as prioritize other people’s perspectives. In other words, they can “hold, prioritize, and reflect on different perspectives and relationships” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p 47). Self-Authoring knowers can control their feelings and emotions and are able to discuss their internal states (Drago-Severson, 2009). They also have the capacity to hold opposing feelings simultaneously and not be torn apart by them (Drago-Severson, 2009). Self-authorizing can generate their own systems of values and standards and can identify with abstract values, principles, and longer-term purposes. An area of growth for adults who are self-authoring is that the self-identifies with or is made by its ideology; it is identified with its own assertions and theories (Drago-Severson, 2009). In other words, a self-authoring knower cannot take perspective on her own self-system because it is embedded in her
own ideals and principles. Table 2.2 summarizes the supports and challenges for self-authorizing knowers.

Table 2.2

**Self-Authoring Knowers: Supports and Challenges for Growth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supports</th>
<th>Challenges (Growing Edge)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Provide opportunities to learn about diverse points of view.</td>
<td>• Challenge knower to let go of own perspective and embrace diametrically opposing alternatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide opportunities to analyze and critique ideas and explore own goals.</td>
<td>• Support this knower’s acceptance of diverse problem-solving approaches that differ from own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure that learning from the process takes place.</td>
<td>• Challenge knower to set aside own standards for practice and open up to other values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support learning about and demonstrating own competencies.</td>
<td>• Support critique of own practices and vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emphasize competency.</td>
<td>• Encourage the acceptance of diverse ways to explore problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Invite demonstration of competencies and dialogue.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from *Leading Adult Learning: Supporting Adult Development in Our Schools* (p 48), by E. Drago-Severson, 2009, Corwin and National Staff Development Council. Copyright 2009 by Eleanor Drago-Severson.

**Moving from One Way of Knowing to the Next.** It is important to note that the research shows that moving from one transitional space to the next is gradual and incremental. In fact, in all of the longitudinal data, movement from one transitional phase to the next has not occurred in less than one year (Drago-Severson, 2004a; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000; Kegan et al., 2001). However, there is no maximum amount of time for these kinds of change to occur; again, growth depends on the presence of appropriate supports and challenges.
Professional Learning for Leadership Development

In this section, I write about how adult development theory informs the design of professional development programs. Michelle LaPointe and Stephen Davis (2006) point out, relatively “little is knowing about how to design programs that can develop and sustain effective leadership practices” (p.16). Traditionally, professionals in schools and school systems carry out their work and practices on their own, without the benefit of a supportive yet critically thoughtful observer (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2013, 2016). Thus, many times their good work is not replicated, built upon, examined or celebrated.

Research on professional learning have shown that meaningful professional development for educators – superintendents, principals, teachers – entails job-embedded, ongoing, safe opportunities and engagement in meaningful dialogue about their work and its inherent challenges (Gusky, 1995, 2000; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Teitel, 2006).

In many public school districts across the country, some of these elements of professional learning are already incorporated in the various leadership development opportunities offered by individual schools, superintendents, and leadership programs. However, the implementation of these programs is uneven at best.

Because adults experience the world and learn in different ways, Drago-Severson (2004b, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2016) suggests that we must re-envision staff development to intentionally provide opportunities that invite all types of learners. Drago-Severson (2009) outlines a number of different types of staff development: training, observation/evaluation and feedback assessment, involvement in school improvement process, inquiry/collaborative action research, self-directed and mentoring/coaching. See Table 2.3 for a summary. This work
originated from her earlier review (1994) and was extended in 2004. These different types of staff development target use types of development to support various school leaders.

In my research, I was interested in asking new principals the kinds of professional learning opportunities they received as assistant principals in supporting their leadership development. This table can help better understand the alignment between what the participants describe as useful and supportive, and what the intended outcomes of the development method. Additionally, this research shows that different types of professional development have different underlying assumptions about why the professional development is necessary. Each of these types of professional development will match up differently to each school leader, depending on their developmental way of knowing.

Table 2.3

Types of Professional Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining Characteristics</th>
<th>Focus: Target of Development</th>
<th>Methods: Types of Initiatives</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Mode of Delivery</th>
<th>Underlying Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Information, increasing knowledge, and skills development</td>
<td>Most in-service, some coursework, Hunter model</td>
<td>Improved student achievement, enhanced teacher knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Are mostly single-shot or “drive-by” experiences.</td>
<td>Techniques and skills are worthy of replication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation/ Evaluation &amp; Feedback Assessment</td>
<td>New or improved teaching methods through skill development</td>
<td>Peer coaching, clinical supervision, teacher evaluation</td>
<td>Improved student achievement through improved teacher performance</td>
<td>Several conferences and/or meetings occur over a period of time.</td>
<td>Colleagues’ observations and feedback will enhance reflection and performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in School Improvement Process</td>
<td>Increased knowledge and skills needed to participate effectively in decision making</td>
<td>Curriculum development, research into better teaching, assessment of student data, improvement processes</td>
<td>Improved classroom instruction and curriculum</td>
<td>Longer term—may span several years.</td>
<td>Adults learn most effectively when faced with a problem to solve; that is, issues of practice that are meaningful to them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Inquiry/ Collaborative Action Research  
Improved decision-making skills, collegiality, collaboration, communities of practice
Collaborative action research, collaborative research, study groups, roundtables
Improved teaching practices and greater student learning.
Variable—depends on context and current problems, issues, and dilemmas.
Process is self-managed and nonhierarchical; teachers have knowledge and expertise that can be brought to the inquiry process.

Self-Directed  
Increased self-direction, pursuit of self-defined interests.
Self-directed learning, journal-writing, evaluation with teacher setting goals
Improved collegiality and opportunities for reflection
Variable—depends on context and current problems, issues, and dilemmas.
Adults are capable of judging their own learning needs; adults learn best when they are agents of their own development.

Mentoring/ Coaching  
Psychological development of self through the context of the interpersonal relationship
Supportive, longer-term interpersonal relationship
Psychological development of self
Usually longer term—may extend over several years.
Development occurs in the context of a relationship, a constellation of relationships, or a team; mentoring skills can be taught to adults.

Pillar Practices  
Cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development of self through the context of pillar practices
Teaming, mentoring, providing leadership roles, collegial inquiry
Cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development of self
Longer term—extends over several years.
Development is enhanced or inhibited by context and increases in cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities enable self to better manage the complexities of teaching, leading, learning, and life.

Note. Adapted from Leading Adult Learning: Supporting Adult Development in Our Schools (p. 20), by E. Drago-Severson, 2009, Corwin and Learning Forward. Copyright 2009 by Eleanor Drago-Severson.

**Formal and Informal Structures for Professional Learning**

As shown in the table above, there are many different structures to support adult learning for assistant principals and principals. One key aspect of these different structures is the formality of the type of professional development. To understand participants’ professional learning opportunities, I provide an overview of the formal and informal structures for professional learning.

**Formal learning opportunities.** Formal learning opportunities are defined as structured learning environments with a specified curricula, such as graduate courses or mandated staff development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). These are generally full- or
half-day activities in which experts disseminate information that can be applied in the workplace (Desimone, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

This model assumes that adult learners update their knowledge and skills by means of workshops and courses (Desimone, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Many states require teachers to attend such activities on a regular basis, and as such, they are still the most widely used form of professional development (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, 2017). In New York State, for example, requires teachers to complete 100 hours of sponsor approved Continuing Teacher and Leader Education (CTLE) per five-year period in order to maintain their license (NYSED, 2017). New York’s Department of Education defines CTLE as “activities designed to improve the teacher or leader’s pedagogical and/or leadership skills, targeted at improving student performance.” (NYSED, 2016). They also maintain a list of approved sponsors that can officially offer CTLE.

In Table 2.3, the first three types of professional development listed are most closely associated with formal learning structures. My research questions and interview protocols will explicitly ask the participants about their transition from assistant principal to principal and the kinds of professional learning that was most helpful in preparing them for the principalship.

**Informal learning opportunities.** Building on the theories of Bolman and Deal (1984), Victoria Marsick, Marie Volpe, and Karen Watkins have argued that given the rapid pace of change in the workplace, workers need to be involved in continuous learning (1990, 1999, 2015). Leaders and employees typically assume increasing responsibility for their own and their organization’s learning – and much of that learning is informal or incidental (Marsick et. al., 2006). Preliminary review of research conducted by Marsick et. al. (2006) suggest that as much of 70% of all workplace learning is informal. In the corporate literature, these percentages have
even become standard rules of thumb for managerial development. GE developed a 70-20-10 leadership development practices rule that show up in other companies: that is, “that such development should involve 70% on-the-job learning, 20% learning through relationships outside of one’s area of focus, and 10% structured learning/training” (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004).

Informal learning opportunities, in contrast to formal learning opportunities, do not follow a specified curriculum and are not restricted to certain environments (Desimone, 2009; Desimone et al., 2014; Jones & Dexter, 2014). They include individual activities such as reading books and classroom observations as well as collaborative activities such as conversations with colleagues and parents, mentoring activities, teacher networks and study groups (Desimone et al., 2014; Mesler & Spillane, 2009; Jones & Dexter, 2014). Participation in these activities is generally not mandatory (Eurydice, 2008; NASDTEC, 2004), but is at teachers’ and school leaders’ own initiative. As such, the participants are not merely recipients of knowledge. Rather, they organize the learning process and determine their learning goals and strategies independently. Moreover, informal learning opportunities are often embedded in the classroom or school context, which allows participants to reflect on their practice and to learn from their colleagues (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richter et al., 2011). This kind of learning is a cooperative process in which educators come together to discuss and share knowledge, learning from each other’s experiences and gaining new insights into teaching and learning (Jones & Dexter, 2014; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richter et al., 2011).

Marsick and Volpe (2006) described informal learning as “integrated with work and daily routines.” Their review of dissertation studies (1999) identified patterns of learning methods and found that trial-and-error (also referred to learning from mistakes or from experience) was by far
the most often cited. Other frequently-cited methods included reading pertinent materials, observing the examples of peers, supervisors, and “veterans,” and finally group involvement.

Research shows that one of the key ways of supporting new and experienced principals’ learning is by creating opportunities for reflection on practice (Bryne-Jimenez & Orr, 2007; Donaldson, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1998; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2006; Yan, 2020). While principals benefit from practices such as skill development and training provided by their district, they also need time and resources for reflective practice with fellow principals (Bryne-Jimenez & Orr, 2007; Coleman & Perkins, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Bryne-Jimenez and Orr’s model draws on adult learning theories (Knowles, 1978; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) and emphasizes the importance of dialogue and reflection to support learning and development.

Karen Osterman and Robert Kottkamp (2004) define reflective practice as a method for developing a greater self-awareness about the nature and influence of leadership. Their research points to the importance of creating regular opportunities for principals to engage in dialogue with peers. The purpose of such opportunities is to step back from the immediacy of one’s own experiences and gain new insight into practice (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Donaldson, 2008; Drago-Severson, 2004b; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006). These opportunities allow educators to re-examine our assumptions and belief systems and therefore improve our ability to facilitate change and support growth in schools and in ourselves.

Summary

Working in a school can be an isolated, insular experience. Many educators rarely venture beyond their own school walls, and networking opportunities are slim. They seldom have extended time to engage in collegial discussions around best practices and improvement
strategies (Drago-Severson, 2011). My research seeks to understand how, if at all, did assistant principals and principals engage in opportunities for critical reflection with others. Both of these roles can be extremely isolating and opportunities for collaboration with peers can be rare.

In my study, this idea of considering both formal and informal professional learning opportunities for assistant principals who are now principals is particularly important because research shows that adults describe and understand these learning opportunities differently (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Desimone et al., 2014; Jones & Dexter, 2014; Richter et al., 2011). This framework will inform the design of my interview guide and will help me follow up if participants initially overlook the informal learning opportunities (see interview protocols in Appendices A and B).

For example, professional literature can serve as a resource for designing team meetings and suggest ways of dealing with work-related demands (Goldsmith et al., 2014) and yet, it may not be mentioned because formal learning is seen as the main component of professional learning (Desimone et al., 2014). As I seek to gain a better understanding of the professional learning opportunities that have influenced the development of these assistant principals in research questions one and two, it is important that I have a framework to process and understand their responses.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I started with a summary of the roles and responsibilities of principals and assistant principals and how these have changed over the past several decades. I build upon prior literature and studies that show both the critical role that school principals play in the success of their schools and students as well as the challenges that many of these school principals face.
This allowed me to build the case that focusing on the support of principals in this time of transition can pay large dividends for our education system.

With this background context in place, I provided a detailed overview of the theories of adult development and adult learning as it relates to school leaders. Specifically, I focused on Kegan’s (1982, 1994) and Drago-Severson’s (2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016) research can provide a framework for helping us better understand how adults move through stages of development and the ways that we can support and challenge them as they transition from one stage to the next.

I then explain how this theoretical framework informs my research questions: how school leaders describe, understand, and experience the transition from assistant principal to principal, and the influence of professional development to support them in this transition.

By closely listening and attending to the experience of school leaders as they undergo the transition to the principalship, we can gain a better understanding of the deep complexity of professional development and support of school leaders. The research literature shows that adults need different supports and challenges to grow, and I believe that supervisors can provide a tremendous boost to aspiring principals by providing professional development that is considerate of the different ways adults learn and make meaning of the world around them. My hope is that this study will bring in the theoretical constructs and make the connections between what the literature says about ways of knowing, leadership transitions, and the lived experiences of the principals who have undergone this role transition.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study was to better understand how eight new principals, four of whom are predominantly socializing knowers and four of whom are predominantly self-authoring knowers, who had recently transitioned from the role of assistant principal described, understood, and experienced their transition from assistant principal to principal, and the influence of professional development to support them in this transition. In this chapter I explain the qualitative methods I used to examine the different ways that the principals describe, understand, and make meaning of the transition from assistant principal to principal and the influence of professional development to support them in this transition.

First, I begin with my research questions. Then I explain my rationale for qualitative methods. I include my rationale for using both Subject-Object Interviews (SOIs) to understand an individual’s way of knowing as well as my rationale for using qualitative interviews to understand how a group of principals describe and understand the meaning of their professional learning experiences as it influenced their transition.

Next, I discuss the criteria for selecting participants for this study, and my methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, I discuss how I attended to validity threats to my study. Specifically, I address how I attended to researcher bias, reactivity, and descriptive and interpretive validity.

Research Questions

In order to explore how a group of new principals described, understood, and experienced the transition from assistant principal to principal, and the influence of professional development to support them in this transition, I used the following research questions to guide my study.
1. How do eight principals with three or fewer years of experience in the role, four of whom are predominantly socializing in their way of knowing and four of whom are predominantly self-authoring in their way of knowing, describe and understand their transition from assistant principal to principal?

2. What professional learning experiences do these participants describe as most helpful in preparing them for the principalship, and which learning experiences do they wish they had to better prepare them for the principalship?

3. What are the relationships, if any, between the participants’ different ways of making meaning as adult learners and their experiences as assistant principals? Are there patterns in the ways that assistant principals with similar and different developmental positions make sense of their professional learning experiences and this transition to becoming a new principal?

**Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

With my focus on how novice principals described, understood, and made meaning of their transition from assistant principal to principal, I offer my rationale for selecting a qualitative approach. All of my research questions sought to understand how adults made sense of their experiences and were well suited to the use of qualitative research methods.

In this study, I sought to understand both the easy professional moments and the professional frustrations of those in their transition to the principalship so that I could ask them about how, it at all, their assistant principal experiences prepared them for those moments. This required me to learn about the rich inner dimensions of their lives, something for which qualitative research methods are particularly useful (Locke et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2014). I used qualitative methods in my study because I sought to gain better
understanding of how these novice principals made meaning of the professional learning opportunities when they were assistant principals. Qualitative methods, specifically Subject-Object Interviews (SOI) and semi-structured qualitative interviews, are well suited for this kind of study (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2014). Officially, the methodological approach is best categorized as a qualitative interview multi-case study.

**Subject-Object Interviews**

The first phase of data collection involved one-to-one interviews that followed the protocol of the Subject-Object Interview (SOI) instrument (Lahey et al. 1988, 2011). Subject-Object Interviews are semi-structured, qualitative, development interviews (i.e., assessments) designed to explore the ways an individual makes sense of his or her experience. These were used to assess a person’s developmental level (i.e., one’s *way of knowing*) according to Robert Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000; Lahey et al., 1988, 2011). The interview takes about ninety minutes and is conversational in nature. I hired Dr. Nancy Popp, an expert who is a trained administrator of the SOI and a certified scorer of the SOI. As she conducted the interviews, I was blind to the SOI results until after I completed my qualitative interviews.

The SOI interview procedure is structured around a uniform set of probes, around which real-life situations of the interviewee are generated (Lahey et al., 1988, 2011). In order to understand how the interviewee organizes interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences, real-life situations are elicited from a series of probes (e.g., "Can you tell me of a recent experience of being quite angry about something...?") which the interviewer then explores to discern the person’s underlying epistemology (meaning-making structure). The interviewer then explores the meaning that experience had for the interviewee and how meaning is organized.
Through the SOI assessment procedure, SOI scorers can distinguish four gradations between each way of knowing. Interrater reliability in studies using the measure has ranged from .75 to .90. Several studies report expectedly high correlations with like measures (cognitive and social-cognitive measures) (Lahey, et. al., 2011, Popp & Portnow, 2001). I utilized the SOI in this study in order to select principals who made meaning of their experiences in different ways, and to identify more precisely the complexity of their meaning-making system, according to Kegan’s continuum (1982, 1994, 2000). Because the SOI provides in-depth, qualitative information about an individual’s experiences, I was able to use this data in conjunction with other qualitative interview data I collected to address my last research question. I then took the results of the Subject-Object Interview data of each participant and aligned it to what the participants identified as the most useful supports that they received. This helped me see if there were any patterns among those who were identified as socializing knowers and among those who were identified as self-authorizing knowers. I also looked for differences across ways of knowing.

From the results of this developmental assessment, the expert scorer selected a group of eight participants that met my developmental criteria: four principals who were predominately socializing, and four who were predominately self-authoring. (See Chapter II for a detailed description of the Subject-Object Interview).

As mentioned, I remained blind to the meaning-making complexity (i.e., ways of knowing), as determined by the SOI scores and the content of the SOI data, until after I conducted these two rounds of interviews. I did not learn participants’ ways of knowing until the third phase of data analysis (see below). My goal with this part of my research design was to allow myself to examine the participants’ experiences first without specific developmental
information applied to my initial findings. If I had known the results of the SOI beforehand, it could have biased my understanding of the participant’s meaning making in the two other interviews. See below for further explanation of when and how I added the SOI/way of knowing determinations to my analysis.

**Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews**

The second phase of data collection involved two rounds of one-to-one semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately ninety minutes for each principal (see Appendix E for Dissertation Timeline). These in-depth interviews (see Appendix A and B for the interview protocols and Appendix C for letter of invitation) enabled me to explore complex topics and allowed for ideas to emerge that have not been predetermined (Berg, 2001; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000; Warren & Karner, 2005). Yin (2009) also describes in-depth interview as a type of interview where the researcher can not only ask the respondent about facts but also their opinions about events and in some situations propose their own insights which in turn can lead to further inquiry from the researcher.

Researchers who chose this method typically develop a research question or set of related research questions geared toward discovering what people think and feel, how they account for their experiences and actions, and what opportunities and obstacles they face (Chambliss & Schutt, 2012). Marshall and Rossman (2014) state that in-depth interviews is an appropriate strategy for studies focusing on individual lived experiences and to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words. Semi-structured interviews present the benefit of allowing balance between free flow and directed conversation (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

**Interview 1.** The first interviews were conducted in December of 2019 following a semi-structured interview protocol (please see Appendix A). I designed it specifically to
understand the themes identified in my literature review and resulting conceptual framework, as can be seen in Table 3.1. This interview helped me answer my first and second research questions. The purpose of the first interview was to gather information to help me understand the overall experiences of the participant’s transition from assistant principal to principal, supports that were helpful in that transition, as well as their hopes and desires for additional supports (see Appendix A and B for interview protocols for each of the interviews). Topics of the first interview included prior work history, overall description of their transition from assistant principal to principal, and their recollections of the supports and challenges through this transition.
Table 3.1

Matrix Relating Research Questions to Conceptual Framework and Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Concepts and Constructs</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do eight principals with three or fewer years of experience in the role, four of whom are predominantly socializing in their way of knowing and four of whom are predominantly self-authoring in their way of knowing, describe and understand their transition from assistant principal to principal?</td>
<td>Role of Principals and Assistant Principals Certification and Training</td>
<td>Interview 1: Q3: Prior roles and background Q4: Current role Q5: Significant events in the past two years as it relates to transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership Pipeline</td>
<td>Interview 2: Q1, 2, 3, 4: Member check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What professional learning experiences do these participants describe as most helpful in preparing them for the principalship, and which learning experiences do they wish they had to better prepare them for the principalship?</td>
<td>Leadership Supports for Assistant Principals and for New Principals Professional Learning for Leadership Development Formal and Informal Learning</td>
<td>Interview 1: Learning experience as assistant principal Q6: Supports (opportunities, activities, events, relationships, mentors, networks) Q7: Challenges (barriers, difficulties) Q8: Retrospective – what is more valuable than you initially imagined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview 2: Q5 &amp; 9: Table of challenges and supports Q6: Format of professional learning Q7: Recommendations as a coach Q8: Recommendations as district leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are the relationships, if any, between the participants’ different ways of making meaning as adult learners and their experiences as assistant principals? Are there patterns in the ways that assistant principals with similar and different developmental positions make sense of their professional learning experiences and this transition to becoming a new principal?</td>
<td>Constructive-Developmental Theory Ways of Knowing Types of Professional Development and Learning</td>
<td>Synthesis of Subject-Object Interview and Interviews 1 and 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview 2.** After the completion of the first-round qualitative interviews and initial data analysis, I conducted a ninety-minute follow-up interview (see Appendix B for Interview 2 protocol) with each participant for the purpose of member-checking (Maxwell, 2013). My
dissertation timeline (Appendix E) provides more details about the sequence of data collection. I used follow-up questions according to emerging themes (Locke et al., 2013). This provided an opportunity to further narrow the focus, to check emerging interpretations with each participant and to incorporate their interpretations of them (i.e., member checking, please see Maxwell, 2013). I asked them questions about my emerging findings and theories to see if they fit with their experiences and if they think it fits the experiences of other new and transitioning principals that they know of.

I analyzed interview transcripts in order to be prepared with follow up on interpretations (i.e., member checking, Maxwell 2013), remaining questions, and probing questions to better understand their thinking and encourage richer and deeper understanding during second interview.

Changes to Selection Criteria Since Initial Proposal

My initial dissertation proposal from 2018 was designed to limit my study to New York City high school principals. My intention was that all of the participants would have met the same leadership licensure and certification requirements – they would all have had to possess New York State certification and have qualified to be in the NYC Principal Pool and have gone through the NYC DOE principal selection criteria (Chancellor’s Regulations C-30). I adjusted my study design in 2019 in coordination with my dissertation sponsor and second reader after I accepted the position of Superintendent within NYC schools. We deemed that my high profile position within the district would create too high a threat to validity arising from participant reactivity and so adjusted the sampling criteria to seek a national sample of principals. The study design I describe next was the final design approved by my committee.

Selection Criteria for Participants
I had four major selection criteria for individual participants, listed below.

**Selection Criterion 1: Principals Who Are in Their First, Second, or Third Year as Principal**

I limited my sample to public school principals who were in their first, second, or third year of principalship at the time of my interviews with them. I focused on studying the experience of these principals in part because I know from personal experience how busy and overwhelming the early years can be. The experience of being a first-year principal is not dissimilar to the experience of being a first-year teacher (Spillane et al., 2015). Regardless of how many years one may have already worked in schools, the scope of the responsibilities can frequently overwhelm the novice school principal. In fact, this is cited as one of the primary reasons why principals do not feel that their work is sustainable (Grissom et al., 2021; Met Life, 2013).

In conducting the interviews, I wanted the participants to be in a state of mind to be able to reflect thoughtfully about their experiences during this time of transition. Focusing on principals when they were in their first, second, or third year allowed participants to reflect on what their transition from assistant principal was like, as well as share the recollection of the experiences immediately prior to the transition. This was designed to help me answer my first and second research questions by asking the participants to think about how their experiences were helpful and what they wish they had more of.

**Selection Criterion 2: Prior Work**

Because my research focused on developing a better understanding the experiences of professional learning of assistant principals as they transition to the principalship, it was logical to limit the study to those who had very recently served as assistant principals or equivalent
roles. There are principals who went straight from teacher to principal, and there are those who may have worked as assistant principals but then spent additional time working in a district office becoming principals. This selection criterion eliminated those principals. I believe, based on my experiences as a principal, that it would be more difficult for those principals to speak about how the assistant principal experience influenced their experiences as new principals.

**Selection Criterion 3: Principals Who Lead General Academic Schools**

I chose to limit my sample to what many districts call “general academic” schools in order to remove the special education schools. In the many public school districts, most students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are enrolled with general education students. Students who have substantial physical, emotional, or academic disabilities, such that they need to be in a more restrictive setting, are often enrolled in specific schools, sometimes in a special district. These special education schools are often multi-site and can span several school campuses. They focus a significant amount of instructional time on workplace readiness and adaptive physical therapy. The challenges of leading these schools are great and substantially different from leading the other general academic schools, and so I decided to place the experiences of their leaders outside the scope my study.

**Selection Criterion 4: Principals Who Are Not Under My Direct Supervision**

At the time of my study, I supervised 48 high school principals and because of concerns about research bias, I ensured that none of the participants were principals that I supervise.

**Selection of Potential Participants**

To recruit participants for my study, I emailed professional contacts and included the selection criteria and a short letter that provided an explanation of the study. The letter of invitation (see Appendix C) and the informed consent form (see Appendix D) outlined my steps
to care for confidentiality (Maxwell, 2013). The letter and informed consent form also explicitly invited participants to ask any clarifying questions they had and/or to discuss the study with me over the phone. I also ensured the confidentiality of the site and the anonymity of the participant by using pseudonyms for both. As I got referrals of possible candidates, I wrote to each of them individually and offered to answer any additional questions they may have had over phone or via email.

As I explained earlier in the chapter, I hired a professional interviewer, Dr. Nancy Popp, to utilize the Subject-Object Interviews to screen for a group of eight participants that vary across the CD-T continuum to continue involvement in the study. Because my third research question sought to understand how a new principal’s developmental capacity (way of knowing) might influence how they make sense of professional learning opportunities, it was crucial that I had participants that had various ways of knowing. In order to end up with eight participants that met my developmental criteria, four who are predominately socializing and four who are predominately self-authoring, I asked the outside interviewer to screen for developmental capacity (i.e. way of knowing) and to help with selecting participants while also allowing me to be blind to the results of the SOIs. This developmental diversity was important to see if there were any patterns and relationships between the experiences of those with similar ways of knowing and those who have different ways of knowing.

As principals began to respond to my emails, I kept a tally of their responses and kept a running list of those who were interested in volunteering for the study. As the responses came in, I referred the participants to my hired SOI interviewer and scorer. The outside SOI interviewer began by interviewing eight participants and let me know when more candidates were needed in order to reach the desired developmental diversity. Over time, I recruited four additional
candidates, for a total of twelve, in order to be able to reach the developmental sample we sought. I asked the interviewer to keep a tally of the SOI scores as the interviews were progressing.

**Data Collection**

As I stated earlier, I gathered data from three rounds of interviews: one round from the independent SOI interviewer, and two rounds from qualitative interviews done by me. I administered the first round of Subject-Object Interviews in November and December 2019 (see Appendix E for detailed outline). Once I had assurances from the expert developmental interviewer that I had sufficient developmental diversity in the sample, I began interviewing the principals. This occurred in December 2019, January 2020, and February 2020. A list of the information gathered is in my interview protocols (Appendices A & B).

**Subject-Object Interviews**

As described earlier in my selection criteria, each of the participants began participating in my research by engaging in a Subject-Object Interview with an independent interviewer, Dr. Nancy Popp, whom I hired in order to ensure that I am blind to the results when I am conducting the two qualitative interviews. The SOI occurred prior to the two semi-structured qualitative interviews. SOIs were conducted by Dr. Popp in order to assess each potential participant’s way of knowing. Interviews were then transcribed and those portions of the interview where structure was clarified formed the units of analysis. I discussed details about the theory underlying the SOI and the associated analysis in Chapter II and a summary of the SOI protocol can be seen in Appendix F.

The independent reviewer conducted the interview and the initial assessment. I was blind to the results of the initial assessment when I conducted the qualitative interviews and initial
analysis of research questions 1 and 2, but I was able to review the data after these steps were completed.

My goal was to secure voluntary permission from eight new principals across two developmental categories: predominately socializing and predominately self-authoring. I described these developmental categories in Chapter II. The assessment procedure from the SOI provided additional information to categorize the participants based on their level of development. Table 3.2 shows the initial categorizing of participants.

Table 3.2

*Category of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominately Socializing</th>
<th>Predominately Self-Authoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant is fully in socializing stage.</td>
<td>Participant is self-authoring with socializing emergent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant is socializing with self-authoring emergent.</td>
<td>Participant is fully in self-authoring stage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3(4)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant is predominantly socializing but with a fully formed self-authoring structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews #1 and 2—Qualitative Interviews**

I used the participants’ description of their experiences and the content of those experiences in terms of supports and challenges described by the participants as the main unit of analysis of my study. My interview questions were spread out over two different interview sessions and focused on their overall descriptions of their transition, the ways in which they felt they were prepared for the new role, as well as the surprises and challenges they experienced along the way. I asked them to reflect on whether there was something about their experiences
that made it easier or harder to undergo the transition into the role of the principal (see Appendices A & B for interview protocols).

Both of interviews 1 and 2 that I conducted with each participant lasted approximately ninety minutes. As mentioned, I provided general topics from the interview protocol to principals in advance of the interview so that they felt prepared to talk about questions that may require more advanced thought. I conducted these interviews in December 2019, January 2020, and February 2020. I interviewed each candidate by phone using a speaker phone setting and used a digital recorder to capture an audio recording of our conversation. After each ninety-minute interview, I created analytic memos to capture my initial thinking and analysis of each participant’s responses (Maxwell, 2013).

In follow-up interviews, I provided participants with a verbal summary of their first interview and asked for any corrections or clarifications they had to offer. I pointed to issues and/or questions that I needed their help with understanding to help clarify issues that I was not sure that I understood for the purposes of member-checking (Maxwell, 2013). I invited participants to ask any follow-up questions and comment on emergent themes (interpretation) that I identified in my analysis of all the interviews. This allowed me to dig deeper into the perceptions each participant shared, as I sought to understand the within-case and cross-case themes, commonalities and differences in an effort to develop common understandings across different ways of knowing.

**Data Analysis**

In this section, I describe the methods I employed to analyze data I collected. The methodology I used was informed by my research questions, conceptual framework, and data collection: the semi-structured interviews and Subject-Object Interviews. The primary goal of
my analysis was to gain a better understanding of how these principals made meaning of their supports in this time of transition.

My data analysis involved a number of key steps, which I approached as a systematic, iterative process (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2014; Miles & Saldana, 2014). These steps included:

- Writing analytic notes and memos after interviews to capture my initial connections, reflections, and reactions (Maxwell, 2013);
- Transcribing interviews via a third-party and then reading back each transcript against the audio recording to check the accuracy of the transcript and to attend to descriptive validity (Maxwell, 2013);
- Using open, or descriptive, coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to highlight the participants’ voice and potentially bring forth ideas or explanations that are contrary to my assumptions or the current literature (interpretative validity, Maxwell, 2013);
- Categorizing data by codes and then larger themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) as well as connecting data (Maxwell & Miller, 2008);
- Building and analyzing within-case and cross-case matrices (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) so that I can develop an understanding of principals’ perceptions and understanding of their transition from assistant principal to principal, as well as how ways of knowing can provide insight into understanding these principals’ experiences of this transition.

**Analysis Step 1: Analytic Notes**
Citing Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Maxwell (2013) suggests that “We should never collect data without substantial analysis going on simultaneously.” (p. 95) After each interview, I wrote an analytic memo to collect my initial reflections and emergent themes from the interview (Maxwell, 2013). According to Maxwell, constructing memos from field notes is an essential step to maintaining this continuous analysis. I discuss these in analytic steps 4 and 5.

**Analysis Step 2: Transcribing Interviews and Reviewing Transcriptions**

All interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded using a separate digital recorder. I then had each interview transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. After receiving the transcripts, I checked each transcript against the original recording, to make sure that there are no transcription errors. Listening to the recordings as I reviewed the transcripts was important for several reasons. First, it enhanced the accuracy of transcripts by making sure pause are noted and transcripts are accurate. Second, this process helped me to better engage data and begin to develop ideas about how data might eventually be categorized (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Third, ensuring the accuracy of data was an essential part of maintaining descriptive validity (Maxwell, 2013), as I discuss below.

**Analysis Step 3: Developing Preliminary Codes**

In addition to the codes I employed from my review of the literature (i.e., theoretical or etic codes) (Miles & Huberman, 1994), I created a list of emic or *in vivo* codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After conducting the first few interviews, I analyzed transcripts using open coding (Maxwell, 2013; Saldana, 2015) to enhance analysis and include new emic codes in addition to etic codes extracted from the conceptual framework. I used emic codes to capture nuances.
My next step was to perform thematic coding on same data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the interviews progress, and the early data was coded, emic concepts were used to build a more substantive listing (Creswell, 2013). These assisted with further analyses.

**Analysis Step 4: Categorizing by Coding**

After coding first interviews and conducting second interviews, I engaged in more substantive analyses. I built a code list and systematically analyzed all data. When coding and analyzing the content of the interviews, I used codes that covered several areas. First, I used codes that will qualify the nature of the experience itself. Then, I used some etic codes based on literature on leadership development and adult development. Those experiences could for example relate to new or complex types of assignments as an assistant principal, positive or conflicting relationships with supervisor, or experiences of challenges versus supports. The types of experiences and the patterns that emerge guided my coding.

My final research question focused on the relationship between principals’ different developmental levels of meaning-making complexity (Kegan, 1982, 1994) and their experiences with the professional development supports offered to them while they were assistant principals. To address this question, I additionally used the data from the Subject-Object interviews, which were conducted before I conducted the two additional interviews. This data includes the scores, comments, or analytic notes from the expert interviewer.

Throughout this analytic process, my ongoing memoing examined the codes for connections and patterns, and I used the emic and etic codes and categories to build comparisons and participants (Maxwell, 2013). Further, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), I incorporated visual displays and matrices to help examine and reduce data during systematic analysis.
Analysis Step 5: Within Case and Cross Case Matrices

At this stage, I organized the data in cross-case matrices. I looked for patterns among participants within a particular developmental way of knowing for similarities and differences and also looked for patterns across different developmental ways of knowing. I also looked for any patterns in their responses to supports they received versus supports they wish they had received.

Ethical Considerations

I submitted the dissertation proposal and the associated letters of invitation (Appendix C) and interview protocols (Appendices A and B) for review by the Teachers College Institutional Review Board for any ethical issues that may come up in the research process. All participants and sites were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Validity

I was interested in learning about how novice principals described, understood, and made meaning of the professional development supports they received while they transitioned from assistant principal to principal. As I analyzed data and memos from the three different interviews, concepts and ideas emerged. I recognize that there were many different ways that this collected data could have been interpreted, and my personal interest in this topic may have an effect on how I derived meaning from it (Maxwell, 2013). I was mindful that my outlook is built upon my understanding that both the participants and I are informed by our own personal perspectives, histories, and environments. Therefore, each participant can only share with me partial knowledge of the issues I am researching, and I used their contributions to my project to build a fuller understanding than my own perspective and experiences could have given me.
In the methodology outlined in this chapter, I have assembled a process that systematically attended to the many different layers of meaning in order to maximize validity and reduce bias. This was my attempt to ensure methodological validity. I also understood that my subjectivity influenced not only what I chose to study but also how I interpreted what I saw. In this section, I further discuss the ways in which I attended to validity threats, care for descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity, and attended to reactivity and researcher bias.

According to Maxwell (2005), “It is important to understand how you are influencing what the informant says…. The goal in a qualitative study is not to eliminate this influence, but to understand it and to use it productively.” (p. 109) If I had done my study seven years ago, I could have been one of the participants in the study. I was an assistant principal who transitioned into a principal role at a public high school. My experiences as a principal, and my interactions with my supervisors and with the assistant principals that I mentor, all shape my perspective. I am able to have a frame of reference to make sense of other people’s transitions. My personal and professional experiences likely helped the participants feel more connected to me as the interviewer and may have made them more likely to share their struggles and challenges.

At the same time, I acknowledge that my experiences created biases and assumptions about leadership roles and transitions. As a former principal and now superintendent who selected certain leadership paths to preparation for these roles, it was important that I acknowledged and then attempted to set aside my own assumptions, throughout analysis and especially during early phases when letting themes emerge from the participants’ own voices.

However, I also felt that I developed a greater appreciation of the challenges and difficulties of the role of the principal and deeply wanted to learn more about my participants’ experiences so that all schools can be successful. I used strategies such as respondent validation,
comparison, and searching for discrepant evidence or negative cases in order to improve the validity of my study and to increase the credibility of my conclusions (Maxwell, 2013). Because I focused in on these participants so closely, I was able to collect rich data and perform intensive examination and analysis to test competing hypotheses to lessen the impact of my own assumptions and biases.

**Descriptive Validity**

As mentioned previously, in order to attend to descriptive validity, I digitally recorded all of my interviews (Maxwell, 2013) and had all of my interviews will transcribed verbatim (Maxwell, 2013). In addition, to attend to descriptive validity, I listened to each audio recording to check transcript against the audio recording of the interview.

**Interpretive Validity**

I also attended to interpretive validity, mindful of the possibility of imposing my own biases on the data by conducting member checks (Maxwell, 2013) with participants, especially during the second interview. After transcribing interviews and beginning open coding, I sent a copy of sections the transcript with my initial interpretations to each participant. During member-checking at the start of Interview 2, I dedicated time to going through different portions of the transcript from the interview to check in with each person about interpretations I made to see how each person made sense of those segments of text. I asked participants to share their interpretations. After Interview 2, I compared their interpretations to my interpretations. In other words, I used member checking to offer participants an opportunity to clarify or modify their responses and/or respond to my interpretations (Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This allowed me to go further in the data reduction process to access emergent themes.
In addition, to address interpretive validity, I shared a subset of interview transcripts with a doctoral student who was trained in qualitative research to cross-check codes and interpretations. This occurred after I begin to develop codes. Sharing interview transcripts with other graduate students who are trained in qualitative research helped to cross-check my initial coding. Furthermore, I was active in a dissertation support group where similar cross-checking occurred on a regular basis (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

One final measure I took to address interpretive validity was to utilize a peer reviewer. I hired a consultant with training in qualitative methods, who is a graduate of TC and is trained by my advisor. This individual has a doctorate and now serves as dissertation consultant to doctoral students to assist with cross checking coding and interpretive data analysis. He served as a third source for cross checking codes and my emerging interpretations. His feedback, participants’ feedback, and cross-checks of codes and interpretations by a peer doctoral student helped me to challenge my developing ideas, cross check codes and interpretations, and push me toward greater interpretive validity.

**Theoretical Validity**

My data collection strategies are directly influenced by my conceptual framework and, in turn, informed by my literature review and research questions (Maxwell, 2013). To attend to theoretical validity, I included participants with different ways of knowing (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003).

To attend to theoretical validity, and to check my emerging theories about what I am learning from data, I shared data and invited a doctoral student colleague and the person I hired to cross check codes and interpretations to help me to closely examine transcripts to search for confirm and disconfirming evidence in relation to the emerging claims I made (Miles, Huberman
& Saldaña, 2014). Questions and feedback from these critical scholars helped me to challenge my developing ideas, and push me towards greater theoretical validity. With the help of peer reviewers, I conducted negative case checking and looked for confirming and disconfirming evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Additionally, I searched for discrepant data and outliers (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin 2003). I also searched for negative evidence in the data in order to determine whether other evidence refuted a finding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Validity Summary

By using member checks, cross-checking, triangulation, memoing, transcript review, interview protocols and working with other doctoral students trained in qualitative research, among many other strategies, I sought to maximize the internal generalizability of this study (Maxwell, 2013).

Limitations of the Study

In this section, I address two natural limitations of my study design, those of reactivity, researcher bias, and sample size. I discuss each of these in turn.

Reactivity

In order to address possible research reactivity, I provided participants with a clear description of the purpose of the study and how I intend to use the research (see Appendix C and D). I believe it was important for the participants in this project to know my background as a current school leader. I included a brief summary of my background as the researcher in the invite letter (Appendix C). By being direct with the participants about my role, what I hoped to learn, and the care for their anonymity, and asking them about this, I hoped it would help address issue of reactivity in the interviews.
In the letters and at the beginning of the interviews, I also clearly described how I would attend to confidentiality interviews by changing or deleting any identifying information, including names of participants and schools. After the interviews I wrote analytic memos (Maxwell, 2013) to reflect on how I might have influenced the interviews.

**Researcher Bias**

As a researcher, it was important that I was aware of my assumptions and biases that may have influenced my data collection, data analysis and my writing of my dissertation. Given my experiences as in the Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College and my familiarity with adult developmental theory, I was likely more conscious of the developmental needs of assistant principals and principals than someone who had otherwise not been exposed to these theories. I spent the past ten or more years as a school leader with this as my primary lens and this experience certainly impacted how I led professional development and how I went about mentoring assistant principals. My experience working in an alternative school, where all of our students struggled in their previous school, also helped me see the importance of openly looking for and embracing the strengths rather than the flaws of each individual. I strongly believe in creating deliberatively developmental learning environments where our students, and our staff members, are able to grow. As such, I acknowledged that I was entering into the participant interviews with some of my own biases.

In order to help mitigate some of this bias, I framed my interview request as a genuine invitation to learn about my participants experiences, as opposed to judging or evaluating their experiences. I also believe that initiating the interview process with a Subject-Object Interview that was done by a third-party expert researcher helped show my interest in who they are as adult learners and help partially alleviate any of the anxiety they may have felt. I also developed my
first interview protocol with these assumptions in mind. Specifically, I was careful to avoid any leading questions as well as anything that presumed background knowledge of adult development theories. My classmates in research seminar convenings helped me be mindful of these assumptions and to guard against them from coloring my coding and analysis.

**Sample Size**

In this study I was able to include interviews with only eight participants. As such, I acknowledge that it is a limitation of my study. With a small sample size, I could not make any conclusions about patterns that might exist in relationship to gender, race, or age. In addition, each of the participants had many factors that could have contributed to their answers and since the sample size was small it was not possible to tease out the potential influence of each of those factors.

I discuss these biases here so that in my data collection, analysis, and development of findings I would carefully attend to these biases and any others that I noticed in myself. While it was impossible for me to eliminate my biases, by being aware of them and monitoring them, I aimed to improve the quality of my data collection, and improve the validity of my study (Maxwell, 2013).
Chapter Summary

In this chapter I explained the methods I used to collect and analyze data for my qualitative, multiple case study. I explained my rationale for each of the principal selection criteria. I explained how this selection of participants employs a strategy of purposeful and criterion-based selection to promote maximum variability (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I described how the three different interviews proceeded: the first being a Subject-Object Interview by an expert interviewer and the second and third interviews conducted by me.

I described how I conducted interviews according to two specific protocols, and how coding and interpretations were cross-checked. I explained how I attended to researcher bias and reactivity and the strategies I employed to maximize the overall validity of the study.
Chapter IV
INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR CONTEXTS

The purpose of my study was to explore with eight principals their understanding of the transition between assistant principal to principal. Additionally, I sought to learn about the professional learning experiences during their transition - what they describe as most helpful in preparing them for the principalship and which learning experiences they wish they had had to prepare them better for the principalship. Finally, I sought to understand what relationships, if any, existed between the principals’ different ways of making meaning as adult learners and their experience as assistant principals in the transition to the principalship.

In this chapter, I introduce each of the eight participants who sit at the heart of this study in order to share the background and contextual knowledge I used to understand their experiences as principals and describe findings from the participants’ interviews. My goal here is to introduce the principal participants and describe aspects of their work context sufficiently for readers to contextualize the findings that I will discuss in the chapters that follow. I designed this chapter to help readers follow the interpretive choices I made in the chapters that follow.

For each of my introductions to each principal and their context, I have employed the same structure. I open with a quote from the principal about the transition to the principalship. I hope this conveys their experience of the transition. I then offer a synopsis of their professional history and describe their background and roles before becoming assistant principals. Next, I describe their transition from assistant principal to principal and describe their current school setting before summarizing the developmental assessment of that participant as assessed by the Subject-Object Interview (SOI). As a reminder, each participant in my study was assessed by Dr. Nancy Popp, an expert in the field, to ensure that the sample contained four participants who were predominantly socializing in their way of knowing and four participants who were
predominantly self-authoring knowers. After introducing each of the eight principal participants, I close with a summary table of all participants and a summary of the chapter.

In this chapter and the rest of this dissertation, I have used pseudonyms for the participants’ names and schools. I gave each of them a choice of pseudonyms, and no one expressed a preference, so the pseudonyms are of my design. I have also included details about the demographics of the schools. I have rounded the number of students for each school to the nearest 50 and have rounded the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch to the nearest 5% to protect privacy. In addition, I rounded the student racial demographic percentages to the nearest 5% to protect privacy while providing enough context for each school. I also list the number of teachers in each school and the total size of the staff; both numbers are rounded to the nearest five.

David

“I love this job. It’s been a lot of fun. There is never a day where I’m bored. It has been one of the most challenging jobs I have ever had but also pretty fulfilling.” - David

David is a White man in his late 30s who was in his third year as principal at a PreK-8th-grade school with about 800 general education students in a large urban district on the East Coast. David had been in education for more than fifteen years at the time of our interviews. I found him self-deprecating and generous in our interviews and well-attuned to his neighborhood district’s socio-economic disparities. For example, David shared the following about his working style:

Because I consider myself as intimidating as a gummy bear, so I’m not going to be able to threaten anybody into working, but I still need them to work, so it’s about sort of
gently coercing them into the work that they don’t necessarily want to do so that I would say those experiences, I definitely leaned upon them.

David explained that he sees himself as a principal who does not operate from behind the desk. David told me his ability to do his job is tied into “working alongside the teachers” in his school, not as a larger-than-life presence, but humbly through his self-deprecation and strong work ethic.

David’s first teaching job was in this school district over 17 years ago. During the interview, he shared his insights into how the demographics of the district have evolved over the last several years and how the school is adapting to the recent wave of gentrification. In taking over for a principal who had served at the school for decades, David told me that he built his relationship with his staff by working hard alongside them and building relationships with them through that work.

**Background and Roles Before Becoming AP**

David’s first teaching job was as a middle school social studies teacher for four years in an urban public school setting on the East Coast. He then transferred to work at a high school in the same district and started taking on low-level administrative functions in addition to his teaching role. As he described how he got into administrative work, he stated:

Many people retired, and just things in the district were changing, so I made the mistake of asking one of the vice principals if he needed help. I’m pretty good with Excel, and just computers in general, and education to a degree is not the cutting edge of technology, so if you know anything about technology, you become this guru, at least in my experience.
David chose to go to a local state university to get his administrator’s certificate in a Master’s program and then got a vice principal’s job in the same school, which he held for three years.

**The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal**

After teaching for ten years and taking on many administrative tasks within the school, David figured that “I’m doing all this work, so let me do a degree.” David participated in a regional principal leadership development program, through which he held a one-year principal internship at a PreK-8th grade school in the district. After completing his internship, David was offered a chance to become assistant principal at a different PK-8th grade school and served for three years. David started his new role as principal at the end of September 2018, after the previous principal suddenly passed away. The previous principal had been in the school for over 40 years. David told me, “He had his own larger-than-life personality. He was like a character that people expected always to be there, and he was there for generations of kids.” Because of this, David felt like his first two years as the principal “could’ve been this case study in school change and what you deal with.”

**Current School Setting**

David’s school serves approximately 800 general education students in grades PreK-3 to 8th grade in the same large urban district on the East Coast. It has approximately 80 teachers on a staff of about 90. The school is over 100 years old and is a neighborhood school drawing from an immediately local geographical area. The student body is approximately 20% Asian, 20% Black, 40% Hispanic, and about 15% White. Approximately 45% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

**Developmental Assessment**
David was interviewed by Dr. Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist who I hired to conduct interviews of all participants. Throughout the interview with Dr. Popp, David demonstrated a full socializing way of knowing (a developmental score of 3). This score means that David, unlike all other participants in the study, exhibited no capacity for self-authorship at the time of our interviews.

**Jesse**

“I believe passionately in this work that we do, and I really, really want to be good at it. This is very overwhelming, but it’s okay that I don’t know it all yet, as long as I’m willing to find the answer. I’m very willing to put a burden on my own back, to get good at it.” - Jesse

Jesse is a White male in his late 30s who—at the time of the interviews—was principal of Canyon Middle School, with 250 students in grades 7-8, in a suburban district in the New England Region. Jesse was in his second year as principal at the time of the interviews. Jesse is the sole administrator in the building. Jesse’s commitment to racial integration was a through-line in our interviews. In the interview, he shared some of his reasoning for moving to the suburban district:

I think my unique journey as a White person going to the White guilt place, to the acceptance place, to maybe actually getting close to being an ally and then being an advocate for good. I think that that journey I’ve been on, I think I can be of service to move a predominantly White community that is also going through that. That’s part of the reason I was excited by a middle-class, predominantly White town. It’s because they need to talk about this, too, and maybe I bring a unique perspective to it.
It was clear through the interviews that he processed many of his career decisions through the lens of race and efforts to eradicate the racial equity gap.

In our interviews, Jesse was a deliberate thinker who had a fast-paced, decisive delivery once he made up his mind. I found Jesse to be a purposeful and motivated educator who often employed captivating turns-of-phrase to describe his experiences. For example, when asked about his first year as an assistant principal, he said: “It scared the shit out of me. It was really hard.” He was readily willing to talk about the challenges of his transition, saying: “In terms of the number of things I didn’t know, it’s laughable. The number of things that made me a good enough teacher to be a viable assistant principal candidate was not necessarily the skills that I needed to develop over time.” It was through his honest and reflective comments that I got to know him better.

**Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal**

Jesse grew up in a middle-class, White town, surrounded by many similar people not far from his current school district. He went to the local state university, and it was there that he gained an appreciation for the perspectives of people with different cultures from his own, which led him to become a teacher. He was a student teacher in an urban public school district in his home state, which proved formative for Jesse. He told me that he felt unqualified and aware of his privilege when working with students who were entirely from communities of color. In reflecting on that time, he said:

I was unprepared. I was unqualified. I was angered. For the first time, I entered into the awareness of my privilege because I saw something so different. My home town and this school were separated by one hill and seven miles, as the crow flies. So I just became gobsmacked at this difference, based upon geography.
This feeling of being “gobsmacked,” or completely stunned, by the sudden awareness of relative privilege set him on his path as an educator that was committed to racial equality. Each of his subsequent jobs gave him additional skills and motivation to address race as a primary part of his educational philosophy.

Jesse’s first teaching job was in a different, very large urban district in the Northeast as a high school history teacher. After one year, he decided to move back to his home state and continued teaching high school history in a “high poverty but majority White town,” where he taught for five years. Jesse next served as a department chair in that same high school for two years. He said that he “fell in love with helping the adults I was working with to be better, and just realizing that there was a certain power in advocating for adults to do something and the impact leaders could have on whole departments.” This motivated him to pursue his administrator’s certificate at the local state university.

After getting certified, Jesse became the founding assistant principal at a new secondary-level magnet school focused on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) that was intentionally racially integrated. The school was in the same district where he was teaching. Jesse served in this role for eight years. Jesse shared that, for him, this “school was home; they knew me before I was married. They knew me before I was a father. That was home.” After building this school for eight years and “working my butt off,” he finally felt ready for a principalship.

The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal

Jesse told me he felt ready to take the next step after his time as an assistant principal and purposefully pursued principal positions across the region to find his next school. The town in which Jesse worked at the time of our interviews was important to Jesse: “Although it’s a
suburban town that is largely White, they’re very much aware of their status.” Jesse shared that he was attracted to the school and district because they had made such intentional efforts to integrate the school and the school system.

Jesse became the third principal of Canyon Middle School in the middle of the school year. Canyon had initially been part of a 6th to 12th-grade school and had split off at the urging of the founding principal, who had been the original secondary-level school’s assistant principal. After a while, the founding principal retired, and the second principal, who was not well known in the community, had a difficult time in his four years. The superintendent decided to create a long, formal search process to prioritize finding just the right next hire that stretched from the summer into the fall. During that time, the superintendent served as acting-principal of Canyon. Jesse assumed the role of the principal in December of his first school year at Canyon.

**Current School Setting**

Jesse’s school served approximately 250 students. The school was attached to the high school. It had between 40-50 staff members and about 30 teachers on staff. It was a local school but also drew students from surrounding areas. The student body is approximately 5% Asian, 5% Black, 5% Hispanic, and about 85% White. Approximately 10% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

**Developmental Assessment**

Jesse was interviewed by Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist who I hired to conduct interviews of all of the participants. Jesse’s Subject-Object Interview score was 3(4): a meaning system that is predominately socializing way of knowing with the beginning emergence of a self-authoring way of knowing. With this scoring, Dr. Popp indicated that
Jesse’s self-authoring structure was still developing, in contrast to participants with a score of 3/4, whose self-authoring structure would be fully formed but not yet dominant.

**Carlos**

“I am one of those people that just loves learning and loves puzzles and sticky situations. We’ll figure it out. Let’s do it. Let’s go. The transition quicker than anticipated and quicker than planned, but I’ve been loving it.” - Carlos

Carlos is a Latino man in his early 40s who was at the time of our interviews principal of a small high school with between 200 and 250 students that served primarily students who were new to the district or refugees from other countries. Carlos’s school was in an urban district in the Midwest. Carlos told me how he was passionate and motivated by working with children, especially in urban school systems. In reflecting on his experiences, he said:

I’ve always worked in schools with language learners. We’re talking about schools that may be socioeconomically under-resourced. I’ve never worked at a school where PTO or PTA has more than $1,000 in the bank. And so, what I would need from colleagues are people who are going to make it work, regardless of the conditions.

He told me that he consistently sought out leadership positions at each stage of his career as an educator. He often articulated what he needed next in his professional development as the primary driver for each subsequent move to a new position. At the time of the interview, Carlos was in his first year as principal.

**Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal**

Carlos started as a teacher in an urban middle school in the Northeast and worked there for fewer than five years. Next, Carlos recognized that there was a lack of support for new
teachers at his first school and because he was seeking to grow as a teacher, he moved to a charter high school in the same large urban district. He also sought out additional training in literacy from a well-regarded graduate school program at that time. Next, Carlos helped start a new school in that same large, urban district focused on health and nutrition and served on this school’s founding faculty as a teacher and literacy specialist for about five years.

Carlos then moved from that large urban district to his current district in the Midwest for family reasons. He taught there while also enrolling in an administrative preparation program at the local state university, which was tuition-free in exchange for a commitment to work in the local urban district. Upon completing that program, Carlos undertook an administrative internship for one year at an urban high school. He then became one of two assistant principals at that same school, focused on curriculum and instruction.

The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal

Carlos was offered a job on the last day of school and given 24 hours to decide if he wanted to become principal of a relatively new high school in that district named Weston High School, a name that is an alias as are all names of schools in this chapter. Carlos had visited Weston before as part of his internship rotation and was excited by the prospect of working with this particular student population. Carlos shared that he was drawn to Weston, saying that “what is unique about [Weston] ... is that we have a high graduation rate and have higher success rates than the rest of the district and getting kids to college.” Carlos became the second principal in Weston’s history and served as the only administrator in the building due to its small size. Carlos was in the middle of his first year as principal of Weston at the time of our interviews.

Current School Setting
Weston High School has about 40 staff members, including 25 teachers, serving 250 students, with an unusually wide variety of primary international languages spoken at home due to the refugee population in the school. The student body is approximately 0% Asian, 60% Black, 40% Hispanic, and about 0% White. Approximately 90% of the students in the school qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Developmental Assessment

Carlos was interviewed by Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist who I hired to conduct interviews of all of the participants. Carlos’ Subject-Object Interview score was 3/4, indicating that he was in one of the two incremental positions half-way between socializing and self-authoring ways of knowing. Carlos’s scoring means that his meaning making system has both the socializing and the self-authoring way of knowing operating, but with the socializing structure dominant.

Tamara

“[The first year] was eye-opening and very humbling. It has more to do with the fact that over the course of 14 years in my previous district, with the same principal, I knew who to call or what to do, or how to respond... I’m still building that network, and it’s still taking the time.” - Tamara

Tamara is a White woman—who at the time of our interviews was in her early 40s. She was a principal of a new small high school in a Midwest urban district, which had been in existence for three years at the time of our interviews. Tamara was in her third year as principal at the time of our interviews. The school, Environmental Studies, has a STEM focus and strong partnerships with community institutions and about 100 students per grade. Tamara progressed
very quickly to school leadership, having taught for fewer than five years before becoming an assistant principal. She served as an assistant principal for more than ten years and then became a principal. Compared to other participants in my study, Tamara served for a long time as an assistant principal and described how she felt ready to become a principal by the end. For example, Tamara shared that the last several years of the assistant principal professional learning community (PLC) in her district felt “fairly unnecessary because, at that point, I was the veteran of the group” but that she was “of course, happy to share any advice or whatever with the newer assistant principals for instruction.”

**Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal**

Tamara’s college degree was in the arts, and she went through a licensing program to become certified to teach arts and English. Her first jobs were in a boarding school setting in the Midwest, serving for one year as a residential life advisor and then teaching English for only a couple of years beyond that. During her teaching stint, she said, she knew she wanted to become a school leader. Tamara shared, “I knew, within those two years of teaching, that I really wanted to go into administration and that I wanted to try to do my master’s degree as a full-time student.”

Tamara completed her master’s in school leadership in the Southeast over two years and enjoyed her year-long internship at a large comprehensive high school so much that she took a job at that same school. Tamara served as a coordinator for one year at that school and then became an assistant principal of instruction in the following year and served in that role for just over ten years. Due to its size, the school had about six assistant principals, and Tamara was in the lead role among those administrators.

**The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal**
Tamara needed to move closer to her family for personal reasons and so decided to look for school leadership jobs back in the Midwest. There was a grant program to design new schools in the urban district in which Tamara worked at the time of our interviews, and Tamara applied to this program. She told me that she was drawn to this program because of the similar opportunities she encountered during her Master’s program. Tamara said what appealed to her most was how she “started with two other principals who were going through the same design process, and so I really felt [it was] like the cohort model that I had experienced in my master’s program … [and so] being able to start this particular journey as a principal” in a similar model was exciting. Tamara’s grant proposal was accepted, and she spent between one to two years designing her school, which became Environmental Studies.

This transition had several significant features for Tamara. She told me that she felt well supported in designing the school, with ample mentoring and a clear process. Tamara had the freedom to design the school with the particular needs of the community in mind. Tamara shared that going from a large, well-established comprehensive high school with nearly 3000 students to leading a new school with fewer than 400 students was a significant shift for her. Additionally, Tamara told me that the instructional practices she was accustomed to in the Southeast were quite progressive and well developed compared to the common practice in the Midwest district she joined. She found herself “revisiting a lot of that work [from the previous district] and reusing the resources we developed as a community.”

Current School Setting

Tamara’s school, *Environmental Studies*, was located in a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. Environmental Studies was a neighborhood school that drew from a local district that had previously been served by a very large high school broken up into a smaller network of high
schools. The school had approximately 35 staff members, including 20 teachers. The student body is approximately 0% Asian, 40% Black, 30% Hispanic, and about 25% White. About 95% of the students in the school qualified for free or reduced lunch.

**Developmental Assessment**

Tamara was interviewed by Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist who I hired. Tamara’s Subject-Object Interview score was 3/4, indicating that she was in one of the two incremental positions half-way between socializing and self-authoring ways of knowing. Tamara’s scoring means that her meaning making system has both the socializing and the self-authoring way of knowing operating, but with the socializing structure dominant.

**Kelly**

“I come from a very team-minded approach. I grew up playing sports all my life, and I believe very much in the community. I’ve always known my comfort zone is bringing people together and moving us forward, realizing everyone’s good thinking.” - Kelly

Kelly is a White woman, who, at the time of our interviews was in her 40s. She served as a middle school principal in a suburban district in the Northeast and was in her third year as principal at the time of our interviews. The school had approximately 600 students and was located in an affluent community. Kelly was married to an educator, which she shared was a big source of support for her.

Kelly peppered our interviews with sports analogies, often framing her anecdotes using those terms. For example, she repeatedly used the concept of “lanes” to describe her role as an assistant principal. Connecting these metaphors to her background, she shared: “I come from a very team-minded approach. I grew up playing sports all my life, and I believe very much in the
community.” Later on, in describing her interview process, she explained that she did not have an “inside track.”

**Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal**

Kelly started as a middle school teacher for five years and department chairperson, and then a high school assistant principal in a few different neighboring districts in the same state. Each of these districts featured, according to Kelly, “high expectations and high parent involvement.” She then served as an assistant principal for about five years at the middle school in her current district before becoming principal at that school. Kelly shared that she had been in that particular school for over 15 years before becoming the principal. Kelly was encouraged by her mentors to earn an administrative degree and had worked as an assistant principal for six years before assuming the principalship.

**The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal**

When Kelly went from social studies chair to assistant principal position in the school, it was to set herself up to become the principal of the school. She said:

I would never announce that, obviously, but that’s what I wished to do. I was pretty well-skilled, and my reputation’s good enough that I thought I was going to be capable of [becoming the principal.] … My intention was to do that, but I had to earn it.

Throughout the interview, she consistently portrayed herself as a “resilient and reliable soldier” working on behalf of her school.

During her time as an assistant principal in her current school, the principal’s health began to fail. At the time, the superintendent increasingly relied on Kelly to ensure the school functioned well and let Kelly know that the principal’s role would be hers when the time was right. When a new superintendent took over the district, Kelly was made to go through an
extensive interview process such that Kelly said she had felt she had to “earn her way to becoming the principal.” Kelly shared: “As the process went on for those three or four months, I think everyone was shocked that it took that long, and they felt like I was really ... In their eyes, I had earned it, that it wasn’t given to me.” This difficult process, Kelly said, helped forge her transition from assistant principal to principal. Kelly told me, “However, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, and I think it did build character, and it does give me a whole lot of not one person can ever doubt that I earned the spot, so that empowers me.” This perception of earning the role was formative in shaping her initial years as a principal.

**Current School Setting**

Kelly’s school served approximately 600 students. It was the only middle school in the suburban school district. It had between 60 staff members and about 50 teachers on staff. Kelly told me the school district was proud of its college admissions rates, and parents frequently compared themselves against neighboring districts. A recent community initiative was started to teach local children about philanthropy. The student body is approximately 5% Asian, 0% Black, 5% Hispanic, and about 85% White. About 10% of the students in the school qualified for free or reduced lunch.

**Developmental Assessment**

Kelly was interviewed by Nancy Popp as well and her Subject-Object Interview score was 4(3): meaning that in her interview, she demonstrated a full self-authoring structure with some remnants of a socializing structure. Kelly demonstrated this way of knowing throughout her interview, with Dr. Popp citing evidence for this is in the ways she talked about her experiences as a principal and what her values and beliefs are about how she embodies her role.

**Lauren**
“As the new person coming in, you don’t change everything at the beginning, and I’m in this interesting stage of building trust and building relationships while trying to make the unpopular decisions.” - Lauren

Lauren is a White woman who was in her mid-30s at the time of our interviews. Lauren was a high school principal in a suburban district in the Northeast and was in her first year as principal at the time of our interviews. Lauren’s school, which I call Cairo High School, had about 500 students and was the only high school in its district. Lauren struck me as someone who cared a lot about the culture of the school communities she worked with and often framed her thinking about school leadership in terms of culture. For example, Lauren described the school culture she wanted to build as principal as one where she kept “everyone in the conversation and feeling like we’re part of something bigger, together.” I found Lauren to be serious and reflective. She was also possibly the busiest participant in my study: it took us months to find a window to schedule our final interview.

Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal

Lauren went to university in a major city in the Northeast, studying English and Education. Lauren started her teaching career as a high school English teacher in that same major urban school district, teaching at that school for more than two and fewer than five years. It was a new small school and had small learning communities. Lauren told me she learned a lot about building teacher leadership and instructional leadership by participating as a teacher and seeing her new school community form. As her small school kept growing, Lauren became its first assistant principal after completing her master’s degree in school leadership at a university in that same city.
The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal

After a handful of years in her first assistant principal role, Lauren took two different assistant principal positions in high schools in affluent suburbs outside of that same city. In the discussion about these various roles, Lauren shared:

My AP roles at my three schools were all wildly different from one another, even though it was the same position. In [the urban school], the AP position was very much an instructional leadership position. We were, I think, a very forward-thinking school organized as a small learning community. It was a lot about building teacher leadership, instructional leadership, that kind of thing. We focused on instruction as administrators in a way that we would never have time to do in our current roles. Sometimes, people that I’ve encountered, who work in the suburbs, that have never worked in a really quality [urban] school, sometimes look down on people that came from the city. But I think the instructional leadership was so much stronger there than it is in any of the other places I’ve been.

In what she shared, Lauren pointed out how she perceived the importance of instructional leadership work and how this priority was not as high for suburban districts. Lauren told me that assistant principals in the suburban districts that she worked in had to spend more time answering parent complaints: “In my first AP position outside of the city, just the sheer volume of open parent complaints about everything, the culture of parents not wanting to talk directly to teachers because they felt like there was going to be retribution … [it was] very different in the suburbs than it is in the city.”

Shortly after moving to her third assistant principal position, Lauren began the interview process to become the principal at Cairo, which she started at the start of that summer. Lauren
said that her interview process was so extensive that she felt she got to know her new school community well:

I always joke that I spent so much time transitioning that I felt like I’d been there forever when I started this job. I started interviewing for the job back last January, I think. It was quite an extensive interview process. But then, once I was actually appointed, I spent, I think, six or seven full days at the school last spring when I started my entry process. There was a lot of public relations type stuff, like holding evening events for the community to come and meet me, events with students to come and meet me, and that kind of stuff. By the time I started on July 1, I was not ready to go in terms of the job but ready to go in terms of the community, knowing me and me having a reasonably good sense of who the people are and who the staff is.

At the time of the interview, she shared that she felt “settled” in her new position and was happy to call this place home after all of the transitions.

**Current School Setting**

Lauren described her school’s town as an “intact town,” by which she meant that many families were multi-generational such that, she said, “a lot of people who have lived there for multiple generations chose to raise their kids there.” Lauren said that this was true for the staff, with many of them also living in the town or having graduated from Cairo High School.

The school served about 500 students. The student body is approximately 5% Asian, 5% Black, 15% Hispanic, and about 80% White. About 15% of the students in the school qualified for free or reduced lunch. There were one assistant principal and one dean of students working under Lauren, and about 80 staff members, including 50 teachers.
Developmental Assessment

Lauren was interviewed by Nancy Popp, and Dr. Popp assessed her meaning making from the Subject-Object Interview to be 4(3): meaning that in her interview, she demonstrated a full self-authoring way of knowing with a few minor remnants of the socializing structure. According to Dr. Popp, there were only a few remnants of the socializing way of knowing, “almost not enough to score,” by which Dr. Popp meant that Lauren was very nearly operating with a fully self-authoring way of knowing at the time.

Rebecca

“I did not realize how good I had it as an assistant principal until I transitioned to the role of principal. It’s not that I don’t like my job. I am really enjoying the role and feel very satisfied with the work. In hindsight, I think I was very deliberately cultivated by the person who was the principal at the time in terms of taking a learning stance towards me and really taking the stance of wanting to build my capacity. That’s the thing that really made a difference.” - Rebecca

Rebecca, a White woman, was in her early 40s at the time of our interviews. I found her to be a proud and passionate principal of a high school in an urban city center in the Northeast. Rebecca was in her second year as principal at the time of our interviews. Rebecca told me how she felt connected to her school’s mission, Humanities Academy, which was designed to support older students who struggled in their previous high schools. Rebecca was proud of what they did, sharing that, “Our students engage in really thoughtful, deep learning out in the city in ways that would challenge any adult and are well beyond what was expected of me as a high school student.” Rebecca’s passion was apparent in how she worked to advocate for her school, saying that part of “my job is to get the word out and also translate for people who might otherwise
misunderstand the school.” Rebecca had a love of learning and had compassion for the students with whom she works, often sharing anecdotes about her students throughout our interviews.

**Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal**

Rebecca taught in three different high schools, first in a suburban high school and then in a second high school in a major urban city in that same state, spending two or three years in each role. Next, Rebecca was a founding teacher at a new small high school in that same urban center, an experience that she said shaped her “a lot in terms of my trajectory and how I saw education and what I knew was possible in schools.” This experience inspired her to want to start her own small school, and she earned her administrative credentials shortly after that. During her graduate study, Rebecca visited many similar small schools, one of which was *Humanities Academy*. Rebecca said,

[I] just really fell in love with the place because it just embodied so much of what I wanted education to be and the way that I wanted the world to be. I definitely remember so much about that first day visiting the school and what it felt like in those early visits, in terms of, ‘Wow, this actually exists? I want to be part of this, and I want to be part of sustaining this place and making this place as beautiful and wonderful as it possibly can be.’

After graduation from her education leadership program, Rebecca became assistant principal at *Humanities Academy* and served in that role for about six years before becoming principal.

**The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal**

When the principal of Humanities Academy was promoted to take a new job in another school, Rebecca was appointed interim acting principal. She then was formally hired as principal
of Humanities Academy shortly after that. Rebecca described herself as a “co-school leader”
during her time as assistant principal, given broad latitude to lead instruction, design professional
development, and participate in all major decisions. All of this meant that when Rebecca
became principal, the staff and faculty saw her as a natural choice, she told me. While Rebecca
had significant exposure to leading the internal dynamics of Humanities Academy, she told me
that managing the politics within the larger district felt relatively new:

   Just navigating certain aspects of the political landscape and the politics of the district… I
   had had some practice with some of those things. Still, in certain ways, they were new
   enough to me, especially because it’s different when you’re the principal than when
   you’re an assistant principal … You’re the person who [has] final responsibility … It felt
   harder. Maybe it’s just also more of a stretch for me to do that particular part of the work
   in terms of my personality and what I enjoy doing.

   When she took on the principalship, she recalled a mentor saying to her, “You know how
do this.” The reassurance, she told me, helped remind her that she had enough practice and
was ready to lead the school.

Current School Setting

   Rebecca’s school served approximately 600 students. It was one of many high schools in
the district and drew students from across the city. It had approximately 55 staff members and
about 35 teachers on staff. Three assistant principals worked alongside Rebecca at the time of
our interviews.

   The school had been open for over 40 years and was well known in the community for
helping students graduate. The student body is approximately 5% Asian, 40% Black, 40%
Hispanic, and about 15% White. About 65% of the students in the school qualified for free or reduced lunch.

**Developmental Assessment**

Rebecca was interviewed by Dr. Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist who I hired. Rebecca’s Subject-Object Interview score was 4(3): meaning that in her interview, she demonstrated a full self-authoring way of knowing with some remnants of a socializing way of knowing. This was echoed in her interviews, in which she acknowledged that it was still hard at times to disappoint others while critiquing her own thinking in the next breath as something she ought not to let bother her.

**Regina**

Regina was a principal of a single-gendered, public charter school in an urban center in the Northeast at the time of our interviews. Peninsula Prep, a pseudonym for the school, served 250 students in grades Pre-K-4. Regina was in her third year as principal at the time of our interviews. Regina identified as an Asian woman in her late 30s. Regarding each of her career transitions, she spoke about finding a “place where I know I can grow.” Regina grew up in a family of teachers stretching back a few generations. She felt drawn to education, even articulating her leadership role in terms of instructing other adults and helping them grow.

**Background and Roles Before Becoming Assistant Principal**

Regina attended an all-girls school for high school. After graduating from college with a degree in art history, her first job was with Teach for America, teaching in a charter school. After finishing her TFA commitment, she continued to work as a teacher for several years at the elementary school level in another charter school before teaching at an American international school abroad for two years. Regina told me this was her first exposure to having a large number
of students who did not speak English as their primary language. Upon returning to the Northeast, Regina taught as a homeroom teacher at an elementary charter school, focusing on the arts for more than two and fewer than five years.

Regina decided that her next position should be in a school, “where I think I can be for a while.” This job search led her to Peninsula Prep, which she told me met all of her criteria. Regina said, “The teaching staff was super caring. I got asked questions I’d never been asked for in terms of my teaching.” In short order, she said, she knew this was “a place where I want to grow.” Regina’s first role at Peninsula Prep was as an instructional literacy coach and then as an academic director for about five years. Peninsula Prep did not have an assistant principal position at that time. Regina told me that, through her director role, she fulfilled many of the duties an assistant principal does at other schools. Working in this role was her primary preparation for school building leadership.

**The Transition From Assistant Principal To Principal**

Once the school had grown to its full capacity, the principal under which Regina worked decided to move on, and Regina declined to interview for the role. She shared with me that her thinking at the time was: “I’m really happy in my role right now. I’ve learned a lot. I continue to learn ... I guess, I didn’t feel I was ready.” She said, “I’m really happy in my role right now. I’ve learned a lot. They’ll find someone who’s a great fit for the school. There’s enough time to hire.” The principal hired to take over leadership of Peninsula Prep proved quickly to be not a good fit and left the school soon after. When the superintendent offered the interim principal role to Regina, her thinking had changed. She told me:
I didn’t even have to think twice about it. I said, ‘Absolutely.’ Also, having had a year that I had, I thought, ‘I would much prefer being the principal and getting to make decisions that staff wasn’t able to make.’ [I thought], ‘I can do it.’

In short, Regina now felt she was ready, based on her strong relationships with the staff at Peninsula Prep and her desire to care for them.

In her first few weeks as a principal, Regina conducted a “listening tour,” in which she met one-on-one with every single staff member in the school. Regina told me that this was important, saying she felt it helped each staff member feel more invested in what the school was doing. By watching how the previous principal struggled, Regina told me she focused her leadership on relationships:

I learned a lot from [the previous principal] in terms of driving expectations and instructional practice. But you don’t have those things unless you actually have a team that’s willing to do that. It’s impossible to do that without the people that are working at the school.

Compared to other principals in this study, Regina described spending far more time focusing on instructional leadership and less time focusing on logistics and operations. In her school, the oversight of master schedule, budgeting, and operations was primarily handled by the charter school network of which Peninsula Prep is a member. Since these duties played to Regina’s already-developed strengths, her transition seemed less complicated than others in the study, as I will discuss in Chapter V.

Current School Setting

As I described earlier, Peninsula Prep was a pre-K to 4th-grade public charter school in an urban center in the Northeast serving 250 students. Peninsula Prep was one of several schools
in a larger regional network of charters and had approximately 30 staff members, including 20 teachers. Peninsula Prep drew its students from the neighborhoods nearby. The student body is approximately 0% Asian, 50% Black, 50% Hispanic, and about 0% White. About 70% of the students in the school qualified for free or reduced lunch.

**Developmental Assessment**

Regina was interviewed by Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist who I hired to conduct interviews of all of the participants in this study. Regina’s Subject-Object Interview score was 4: meaning that she demonstrated a full self-authoring way of knowing throughout her interview. Regina was the only participant in the study who did not have at least some aspects of socializing knowing as part of her meaning making.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the eight principal participants in my research with the goal of providing a description of the principals, their trajectory to the principalship, and their current work context sufficient for readers to contextualize the findings that follow from the data the participants provided. A summary table, Table 4.1, is provided below.

Table 4.1
Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
<th>Years as Assistant Principal</th>
<th>School Size (rounded to 50) and Student Demographics (rounded to nearest 5%)</th>
<th>Number of Staff and Members</th>
<th>Number of Teachers (rounded to 5)</th>
<th>Way of Knowing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| David | White male in his late 30s | 3                  | 7                             | Urban K-8 school with about 800 students  
20% Asian Students  
20% Black Students  
40% Hispanic Students  
45% White Students  
45% Free and Reduced Lunch | 90 Staff Members  
80 Teachers | 3 | |
| Jesse | White male in his late 30s | 2                  | 8                             | Suburban middle school with about 250 students  
5% Asian Students  
5% Black Students  
5% Hispanic Students  
85% White Students  
10% Free and Reduced Lunch | 40 Staff Members  
25 Teachers | 3(4) | |
| Carlos | Latino male in his early 40s | 1                  | 2                             | Urban high school with about 250 students  
0% Asian Students  
60% Black Students  
40% Hispanic Students  
0% White Students  
90% Free and Reduced Lunch | 40 Staff Members  
25 Teachers | 3/4 | |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>School Size</th>
<th>Student Demographics</th>
<th>Staff Members</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>White woman</td>
<td>in her early 40s</td>
<td>Urban high school with about 250 students</td>
<td>0% Asian Students 40% Black Students 30% Hispanic Students 25% White Students 95% Free and Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>35 Staff Members</td>
<td>20 Teachers</td>
<td>3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>White woman</td>
<td>in her early 40s</td>
<td>Suburban middle school with about 600 students</td>
<td>5% Asian Students 0% Black Students 5% Hispanic Students 85% White Students 5% Free and Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>60 Staff Members</td>
<td>50 Teachers</td>
<td>4(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>White woman</td>
<td>in her late 30s</td>
<td>Suburban high school with about 500 students</td>
<td>5% Asian Students 5% Black Students 15% Hispanic Students 80% White Students 15% Free and Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>80 Staff Members</td>
<td>50 Teachers</td>
<td>4(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>White woman</td>
<td>in her early 40s</td>
<td>Urban high school with about 600 students</td>
<td>5% Asian Students 40% Black Students 40% Hispanic Students 15% White Students 65% Free and Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>55 Staff Members</td>
<td>35 Teachers</td>
<td>4(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>Asian woman</td>
<td>in her late 30s</td>
<td>Urban elementary school with about 250 students</td>
<td>0% Asian students 50% Black Students 50% Hispanic Students 0% White Students 70% Free and Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>30 Staff Members</td>
<td>20 Teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next chapter, Chapter V, I describe findings from my first and third research questions emerging from the interview data provided by the eight participants detailed in this chapter.
Chapter V

THE TRANSITION FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL TO PRINCIPAL

In this chapter, I discuss my findings in light of my first research question, seeking to learn how the participants in my study described and understood their transition from assistant principal to principal. I learned from the participants in my study that the transition to the principalship involved increasing complexity in their work in three dimensions. First, the participants named that as new principals, they had to consider an *increased breadth of responsibilities* (8 of 8), which is how I refer to the transition each participant described from their narrower scope of curriculum and pedagogy as assistant principal to the broader scope of all that they said they tracked as principal, including budgeting, scheduling, supervision of all staff, and in some cases, district politics (4 of 8). Second, I found that participants (8 of 8) described that they had to manage the complexities of interpersonal conflict among a higher number of stakeholders as they transitioned to assume a new mantle of authority as principal. Third, all of the participants (8 of 8) discussed how they found value during the transition in looking inward to clarify their internal values. These values, they explained, acted as a beacon to guide them by managing the breadth and depth of the first two dimensions of complexity.

In this chapter, I also discuss these findings in light of my third research question to explore what relationship exists, if any, between each participant’s way of knowing and their experiences in transitioning to the principalship. Throughout my dissertation, as I have described in prior chapters, I use the term *predominantly socializing knowers* to refer to the first group of participants in my purposeful sample, for whom the socializing way of knowing was evaluated to be dominant, corresponding to Subject-Object Interview (SOI) scores of 3, 3(4) and 3/4. I use the term *predominantly self-authoring knowers* to refer to the remainder of participants...
in my purposeful sample, for whom the self-authoring way of knowing was evaluated to be dominant, corresponding to Subject-Object Interview (SOI) scores of 4/3, 4(3), and 4. As a reminder, this study was designed to have eight participants: four that were predominantly socializing knowers and four that were predominantly self-authoring knowers.

For each of the three dimensions of complexity referenced above, I found that the participant’s way of knowing predicted how they experienced and managed that aspect of their transition. In Table 5.1, I present an overview of all findings in this chapter. First, for an increased breadth of responsibility, arising from the transition from a specialized role to one responsible for the entire school building, I found that predominantly socializing knowers, David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), struggled to manage their time and determine which priorities were most important (4 of 4). In contrast, Lauren (score = 4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), Rebecca (4(3)), and Regina (4), participants with a dominant self-authoring way of knowing, told me that they did not feel like they were being pulled in multiple directions and described systems they had created to manage this kind of complexity (4 of 4).
Table 5.1

Summary of Findings in Chapter V

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Dimension of Complexity, with Common Findings</th>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers</th>
<th>Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increased Breadth of Responsibility</strong></td>
<td><strong>SOI score = 3, 3(4), and 3/4</strong></td>
<td><strong>SOI score = 4(3), 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participants said that the transition from assistant principal to principal was complex due, in part, to taking on the principal’s much broader set of responsibilities. (8 of 8)</td>
<td>• Struggling to work through all the priorities, feeling pulled in many different directions (4 of 4)</td>
<td>• Greater clarity about the scope of their responsibilities (4 of 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participants contrasted their prior role as assistant principal, with a specific scope of work, with that of the principal who has the ultimate responsibility for all parts of the school, including instruction, budgeting, and logistics. (8 of 8)</td>
<td>• Every problem can feel urgent, and it is difficult to prioritize what to focus on (4 of 4)</td>
<td>• Take perspective on the school-as-system, and they developed systems to handle the new responsibilities (4 of 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manage Interpersonal Conflict</strong></td>
<td><strong>The new relationship dynamics caused them to feel stressed and drained (4 of 4)</strong></td>
<td><strong>They fully understood that as leaders, they were expected to engage in difficult discussions with others in their school (4 of 4)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participants said that as they took on a greater breadth of responsibilities in the transition, it affected their relationships with others in the school, and they had many more relationships to juggle. (8 of 8)</td>
<td>• They felt lonely and described themselves as outsiders in the work (3 of 4)</td>
<td>• Unafraid to take on conflicts, and expressed confidence that conflicts can be productive (4 of 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participants described that relationships become complicated because they desired reciprocal and collaborative relationships, but they quickly realized that they were operating in a system where hierarchical and supervisory relationships were the norm. (8 of 8)</td>
<td><strong>Clarify Internal Values</strong></td>
<td><strong>Some also described managing relationships in a bidirectional way, understanding the transition affected not only how others saw them but how they saw others (3 of 4)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarify Internal Values</strong></td>
<td><strong>Made sense of what was important primarily through others’ reactions and judging their values by comparing them against how others in the school community would receive them (3 of 4)</strong></td>
<td><strong>To manage complexity arising from interpersonal conflict, they turned to their own values and beliefs. These personal beliefs allowed them to remain undeterred when confronted with contrary points of view (4 of 4)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participants said that as they took on a greater breadth of responsibilities in the transition, they had to develop a complex understanding of themselves in order to be able to meet the challenges of leading. (8 of 8)</td>
<td>• Recognized that leading with one’s values involved some level of risk (3 of 4)</td>
<td>• Invested time in building their own clarity around their values and learned to communicate those values to the school community (4 of 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participants grappled with their desire to be collaborative leaders and learned to adjust their self-image as a leader in order to meet the needs of the school. (8 of 8)</td>
<td>• Advised aspiring principals to clarify their values in advance. (4 of 4)</td>
<td>• Learned to communicate district priorities as their own (2 of 4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second, for managing interpersonal conflict, I found that the predominantly socializing knowers, David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), described how this transition had an enormous impact on them, such that their rise to this level of authority left them feeling lonely or as an outsider (4 of 4) and that it was difficult to manage conflicts and the expectations that others had of them as principals (4 of 4). I also found a qualitative difference in how these principals described their experience with the complexity of managing interpersonal conflict according to whether they were purely socializing (a developmental score of 3) compared to those who were predominantly socializing [a score of 3(4) or 3/4]. David (score = 3), the only purely socializing knower at the time of our interviews, described his experience solely in terms of how he related to others while Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), who were predominantly socializing in their way of knowing but who had some capacity for self-authorship expressed a growing comfort level with being the leader and authority figure but would have liked additional support in managing challenging interpersonal conflicts. In contrast, predominantly self-authoring knowers told me that they understood and appreciated others’ expectations of them as the authority figure and could turn inside to clarify their own beliefs to effectively manage the conflicts that arose (4 of 4).

Third, for clarifying internal values, I found that predominantly socializing knowers with some capacity for self-authorship described an awareness of how new principals needed to do the hard work to develop these internal values (3 of 3) while predominantly self-authoring knowers pointed to these inner values as foundational to meeting the different types of complexity inherent transitioning to the principalship (4 of 4).

In each section in this chapter, I use the same structure to describe each of the three types of complexities I found. First, I describe the aspects of the complexity common to most or all
participants before detailing how the participants’ way of knowing, either as a predominantly socializing knower or a predominantly self-authoring knower, affected how they experienced and managed the complexity of their transition.

I include a brief biographical overview for the eight participants as a useful summary from Chapter IV. Table 5.2 below lists the participants’ names, race, gender, SOI score, year as principal at the time of the study, school background, as well as brief notes about the transition to the principalship. While I do highlight demographic information (approximate age, gender, and race) in Chapter IV, in my analytic chapters, this one and the next, I have deliberately chosen to not mention these demographic details. When I did my analysis, none of the participants mentioned their age or race as a factor in their leadership. Only one person mentioned gender (Kelly), and only did so to a small extent. In addition, with a small sample size, I don’t feel I can make any conclusions about patterns that might exist in relationship to gender, race, or age.

While I understand that these demographic details are important in general, the heart of my study is a developmental focus and because of this, I center my analysis on it.

Table 5.2

_Brief Biographical Reminder of Participants_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>SOI</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
<th>School Location</th>
<th>School Level and School Size</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David (White Male)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3rd-year principal</td>
<td>Urban school in the Northeast</td>
<td>K-8 school with about 800 students</td>
<td>Took over for a principal who had been there for over 30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse (White Male)</td>
<td>3(4)</td>
<td>2nd-year principal</td>
<td>Suburban school in New England</td>
<td>Middle school with about 250 students</td>
<td>Sought out a predominately White school district willing to work on racial equity issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this section, I describe the first type of complexity mentioned by all of the participants. I found that, for these school leaders, transitioning to the principalship required learning new data and systems, including things like school finance, budgeting, athletics, and bussing. This breadth of responsibility powerfully added to the complexity in their transition to the principalship (8 of 8). A summary of these findings for this section, with participants noted, can be seen in Table 5.3.

While every participant described how they experienced this same broadening of responsibility, I found differences between how predominantly socializing knowers and predominantly self-authoring knowers made sense of the change. David, Jesse, Carlos, and
Tamara, the four participants in my study who were predominantly socializing knowers with Subject-Object Interview (SOI) scores of 3, 3(4), 3/4, and 3/4, respectively, described how they struggled to work through all the priorities they had to manage and felt pulled in many different directions. In contrast, Kelly, Lauren, Rebecca, and Regina, the participants who were predominantly self-authoring with Subject-Object Interview (SOI) scores of 4(3), 4(3), 4(3), and 4, respectively, described encountering this type of complexity in their transition to the principalship, yet, when they described their job and how they focused their attention, had much greater clarity about the scope of their responsibilities. The descriptions of participants who were predominantly self-authoring did not contain the feeling of being pulled in multiple directions that were universal among the participants who were socializing knowers, in part because they had a better understanding of the system they were operating in and the source of demands placed on them (4 of 4). Additionally, as I show in this section, only the four participants who were predominantly self-authoring acknowledged how district-level politics required them to adjust their leadership, placing them in the hourglass of political decisions and all three of them were self-authoring principals.
Table 5.3

**An Increased Breadth of Responsibility According to the Development of Each Participant**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers</th>
<th>Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOI score = 3, 3(4), and 3/4</strong></td>
<td><strong>SOI score = 4(3), 4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| • Struggling to work through all the priorities, feeling pulled in many different directions (4 of 4):  
  David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4  
  Every problem can feel urgent, and it is difficult to prioritize what to focus on (4 of 4)  
  David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4  
  Difficulty delegating responsibilities to others (3 of 4):  
  David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4 | • Greater clarity about the scope of their responsibilities (4 of 4):  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4  
  Take perspective on the school-as-system, and they developed systems to handle the new responsibilities (4 of 4):  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4  
  Able to delegate responsibilities to others so that they could focus on things that were most important to them (4 of 4):  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4  
  Recognition of district-level politics as it impacts their decision making (4 of 4):  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4 |

Common findings for all participants (8 of 8)

- Participants said that the transition from assistant principal to principal was complex due, in part, to taking on the principal’s much broader set of responsibilities.
- Participants contrasted their prior role as assistant principal, with a specific scope of work, with that of the principal who has the ultimate responsibility for all parts of the school, including instruction, budgeting, and logistics.

To support these findings, I first share how participants, regardless of their way of knowing, described how this type of complexity occurred for them as they transitioned to become principals. Then I detail how participants who were predominantly socializing knowers described their experiences with managing interpersonal conflict, focusing on emblematic and rich anecdotes from David and Jesse, before sharing how predominantly self-authoring knowers described the same challenge in very different ways, anchored by an anecdote from Regina. I then close this section with a brief consideration of how only predominantly self-authoring knowers discussed how district-level politics was part of their transition.

**Common Descriptions of Complexity Arising from Breadth of Responsibility**

All participants described how their work went from relatively narrow to quite broad as a part of their transition. As a reminder, I purposefully sampled for former assistant principals and
had recently transitioned into the principal role. Each of these participants described how, when they were assistant principals, they had a narrower scope of work. As David told me, “As an AP, I had a particular lane, and I had only to track the work related to my role.” Every participant in my sample had primary responsibility for instructional leadership during their work as APs, which, based on my professional experience, is quite common for APs who become principals. With the transition to the principalship, they now had a far broader scope of work. So, for these transitioning principals in this study, the new layers of complexity came on top of the curriculum and pedagogy domains they were familiar with. As they became principals, the participants said they worried about “sorting between opposing viewpoints” and “deciding how to manage my time and what to delegate.”

To illustrate this aspect of the transition, I next share a general description from David about how the role of the principalship contrasts with the role of the assistant principal. I then share anecdotes from Kelly and Jesse about their experiences in budgeting. I chose these as rich examples because they were emblematic of this new kind of complexity that these school leaders faced when transitioning from assistant principal to principal. In the following sections, I then describe the different ways that socializing knowers and self-authoring knowers reacted to and made sense of this kind of increased complexity.

David served as an assistant principal in a different K-8 school before becoming a principal of his K-8 school, and he compared the transition o the principalship to the transition to parenting, saying, “I don’t feel like going into what I know now, I was ready, but it’s sort of like parenting. I don’t think you’re fully ready until you’re in the job anyway.” David told me that, for him, “as an AP, you have a specialized focus, and so you don’t leave your lane.” This also meant that there is “not a lot of creativity that’s built into the role as an AP,” as he explained.
Even though David spent several years being an assistant principal in a nearby school, I learned that there was something about the principal’s job that made it feel much more demanding to him. He added that “as an AP usually ... you have some sort of specialized role. You’re not encompassing the whole school building.” He said several times in the interview that being the principal meant that “ultimately, you’re holding the bag,” meaning that at the end of the day, David felt he had the ultimate responsibility and that he felt “the weight of the bag.” This was, he told me, not something he felt before he transitioned to become a principal.

David used the term “primary focus” to describe the main responsibilities that a principal has. For him, it was supporting and supervising instruction. However, once he became principal, he realized that “your primary focus is not the only thing that you have to do, and there are a host of responsibilities that are required even while you maintain your primary focus.” And that despite his best efforts, “the day-to-day sometimes gets in the way of that primary focus.” This was a common sentiment among the principals I interviewed. However, how they responded to this challenge did differ based on their way of knowing. I explain more of these differences in subsequent sections.

Like David, Jesse also told me how many new things he needed to learn and care for after becoming a principal. As I shared in Chapter IV, Jesse was a second-year principal of a small suburban middle school who sought out a predominately White school district willing to work on issues of racial equity. Jesse had spent eight years as an assistant principal and prided himself on developing a strong rapport with students and staff. In his words, “my skillset that I know I was killing from day one was around relationships.” This was in contrast to the many things he did not know how to do as a principal:
I mention that because [relationships] is a nice skill to have on the administration side of things, but it did not help me with transportation. It did not help me with scheduling. It did not help me with the construction of our new building. I became an assistant principal, and then they gave me a draft of a blueprint. They said, ‘What type of key schedule would you like for teachers? Do you want the science classrooms keyed the same way as the teacher’s workroom?’ I’m like, ‘What is a key schedule?’

For Jesse, he understood that the things that “made me a good enough teacher to be a viable assistant principal candidate” were not necessarily the skills that “I needed to develop over time [as a principal].” As he reflected on his first year as principal, he said that,

I needed to really broaden my knowledge base around some of the logistics, around some of the business side of things. So that was a real challenge. I was constantly being presented with things that I’m like, ‘I don’t know. I never thought about “is this a safe bus stop.”’ I just never thought about it before.

Jesse told me that it was not difficult for him to eventually figure out these logistical challenges, such as locating the bus stop or setting up a key schedule, but each of these was things he had to learn. In a similar way to what David said, these new learnings took away time and energy from Jesse’s primary focus.

Working with the school budget was a new complex responsibility named by many participants that typified the breadth of responsibilities inherent in the transition to the principalship. For example, Carlos described how budget creation and management were a big part of the learning he did during his transition. As I shared in Chapter IV, Carlos, the first-year principal of a small urban high school who was drawn to the school because of its focus on serving newly-arrived immigrants, told me how he had served as an AP at a large high school
and the school had a finance clerk who knew all of the rules. He observed that the clerk would “just walk into the principal’s office and say ‘this is what I did’ and the principal would sign and it was done.” Now that he was a principal and working in a smaller school, Carlos told me that his “big learning” was around “budget and finance.” He learned to approve purchases and pay up contracts. Even though he did learn some of it through training, he told me he did not realize just “how on the ball you’d have to be looking at numbers, just how much you have to track... there’s often a lot of kind of wrestling with that like we need to purchase X, Y, and Z, and which fund does it come from because of the specific rules for the funds.”

Jesse, the second-year principal of a small suburban middle school, also pointed to the budget as an emblematic example of how much larger and more complex the principalship is compared with his work as an assistant principal.

So, if you asked me in an interview, ‘Jesse, do you know how to do a school budget?’ I would’ve said yes because I knew the basics of it. But then I became a principal and was given a blank spreadsheet and told, ‘We need your school budget in four weeks.’… I was an eight-year assistant principal, [and it was] not in my job description [to do] budgeting for that school. I didn’t even have a supervisory role of helping certain departments develop initial [budget] proposals that then went to the principal. I had nothing to do with it. And so, it was a new school, a new district, a new type of school. Here you go. We need a budget in four weeks.

Like the other participants in my study, Jesse found that their new breadth of responsibilities required a lot of learning on the fly and sorting through complex priorities and processes.

In addition to budgeting, other non-routine things came up. Sometimes not having the answers caused anxiety because participants said they felt like they should have the answers (7
of 8). Kelly, a third-year principal of a mid-sized suburban middle school in a largely affluent neighborhood, who worked in the same school as an assistant principal, for instance, shared an example that occurred on the day of one of our first interviews,

Today, I had a parent come to me, and they want to take their child out and have them home-tutored for the remainder of the year. That was something I... I don’t know or understand the history required to give them the immediate answer, which is okay. But those are the situations, where I don’t have the experience or knowledge to tap into, that give me the greatest anxiety.

In total, the breadth of responsibility that these principals took on as they transitioned to become principals represented a complex set of leadership challenges that drew their focus (8 of 8), forced them to learn quickly (8 of 8), and at times provoked anxiety when they felt, as Kelly described as if they did not have sufficient experience (7 of 8). In the next sections, I detail the qualitatively different experiences that these new principals with different ways of knowing had as they took on the challenge of managing their new breadth of responsibility.

**Predominantly Socializing Knowers and the Breadth of Responsibility**

I found that David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), the participants who were predominantly socializing knowers, expressed similar experiences and challenges as they confronted the complexity of the breadth of their new responsibilities as principals (4 of 4). They described their experience as struggling to work through all the priorities, feeling pulled in many different directions (4 of 4). For David, Jesse, and Carlos, every problem felt urgent. They often did not know what to prioritize and had a difficult time delegating the responsibilities (3 of 4). Tamara did not mention these latter themes in our interviews. In this section, I support these findings by sharing David’s experiences in sorting
through priorities and Jesse’s description of his challenges in delegating, chosen because their anecdotes were the richest in capturing the experiences that other participants described.

David, a third-year principal of a large urban K-8 school who took over for a principal who had been there for over 30 years, was a pure socializing knower (score = 3) at the time of our interviews. David described his challenges in gauging the relative importance of the many responsibilities he had and had to figure out which one to prioritize so that he could best use his limited time. David shared,

I think as a principal, you just experience it [in] a whole different way… I was talking to my friend. This was her first year as a principal in [my city], and she was just like, “Yeah, no, every problem is like the first time I’m going through this problem.” I know that feeling, and the problem is that every problem, you don’t know how to gauge whether it’s a crisis or not because you’re the one who’s trying to deal with it, so I get that feeling.

For David, his struggle to manage his priorities can be seen in how he struggled with weighing every problem he faced, wondering “how to gauge whether it’s a crisis.” David told me how he cared deeply about the people around him and, consistent with his development as a socializing knower, felt pulled by what they value and all of the various demands placed on him. He shared,

I think because it’s easy to get caught up in the minutia, right? What’s current and present in front of you. If I’m having consistent issues, discipline issues with the students and the parents are combative. So, whenever the child’s name comes up, all of a sudden, this anxiety comes up; it completely takes you off your focus. So, for me, the troubling part, at least the early on especially, was not because I wasn’t focused on one thing that falls by the wayside while something else goes on, and so not being able to be on top of it I would ask.
I think that there was a point early on where I just felt like I couldn’t turn it [the constant nature of tasks] off. There were things that I kept on thinking about, and not repetitively, but just there was so much in terms of the big picture, short term. All the things that needed to be done, and there just wasn’t enough time, not enough of me, to be able to do it.

What makes this illustrative of a socializing way of knowing was how this registered for David as a powerful challenge, seen in how he “couldn’t turn it off” and how “there just wasn’t… enough of me, to be able to do it.” When Dr. Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist who I hired to interview David and all participants in my study, asked David in their Subject-Object Interview (i.e., developmental assessment) what was hardest for him about being the guy everybody comes to, he said, “I think for me, I still have trouble delegating to—there are certain things that, you know, I have to answer for. There are other things that other people could certainly do the job, and I don’t have to own it by myself.” This is characteristic of the socializing way of knowing that does not yet have the complexity of mind to hold and manage all of these competing demands for his attention internally and so feels overwhelmed by it all. And when he said, “I do want to be responsive, but there are other people who could probably respond with more clarity,” he was setting up a kind of comparison in which someone else is better at it than him. That he said he wants to be responsive also speaks to a sense of self that is not entirely in charge of what he does or how he does it and so compares himself to the ways others do it. In the analysis by Dr. Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist, she said that “comparing self to others is one of the socializing mindset hallmarks as a way to begin to define one’s own identity.”
Jesse and David had some of the same struggles with delegating tasks. Jesse, the second-year principal of a small suburban middle school who sought out a predominately White school district willing to work on issues of racial equity, was a predominately socializing knower with the beginning emergence of a self-authoring structure at the time of our interviews [score = 3(4)]. Jesse was most articulate among all predominantly socializing knowers about his struggles with delegating to others. He told me he knows this is an area where he knew he needed to improve and “hopefully not feel guilty about doing so.” When asked what he feels most guilty about, he said, “if I put the burden of doing some of the difficult jobs around here on other people, it would make me feel guilty of why aren’t I doing it? I would be worried about the perceptions that I make other people do it because I’m unable or unwilling. And that would make me feel guilty. It would make me feel a bit guilty of abusing a power that I have, a power to delegate that no one else in my building has… I’m uncomfortable with that power still.”

When the expert developmental psychologist reviewed the transcript, she noted that these are the socializing way of knowing’s hallmarks – feeling guilty about not doing enough or about “causing” someone to feel bad, feeling guilty about “making” others do something, fear of being perceived by others negatively. This guilt, fear, and vulnerability to others’ feelings, expectations, and opinions were the primary organizing influence in his experience and prevented him from taking a perspective on himself in his position to see that it is his job to delegate.

When asked how he manages all of the competing commitments and demands on his time and energy, Jesse said, “I suck at it. Very, very bad…With a personality that likes to please, right? With a person that likes to please, I am the classic martyr of saying yes too often…I genuinely don’t mind making personal sacrifices that make other people happy.” In this excerpt,
Jesse accurately assessed himself. He described himself as a person who likes to please and who is very bad at saying no. He is not taking any kind of perspective on that, consistent with someone for whom self-authorship is just beginning to develop.

As I have shown, participants who were predominantly socializing knowers struggled to prioritize their much bigger scope of responsibilities and delegate all of the responsibilities. As I show next, I found that self-authoring knowers have developed the capacity to put this additional level of responsibility into context and let their personal values drive their priorities.

**Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers and the Breadth of Responsibility**

I found that Regina (score = 4), Rebecca (4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), and Lauren (4(3), the participants who were predominantly self-authoring, still described the complexity of the breadth of the responsibilities of principalship, but that when they described their job and how they focus their attention, they had much greater clarity about the scope of their responsibilities (4 of 4). Their descriptions did not contain the feeling of being pulled in multiple directions that was common among the participants who were predominantly socializing knowers. In contrast, I learned from these participants that they developed systems to handle the new responsibilities (4 of 4). They also seemed better equipped to delegate those responsibilities so that they could focus on the more important things to them (4 of 4). Additionally, the participants who were predominately self-authoring knowers were also the only ones who acknowledged how district-level politics required them to adjust their leadership, placing them in the hourglass of political decisions (4 of 4). In this section, I demonstrate these findings by first sharing Rebecca and Kelly's experiences, who are both mostly self-authoring in their way of knowing. I then share Regina's experiences, who was the only fully self-authoring principal in my sample and whose
approach to managing this complexity was the most well-developed and systematic. I chose these anecdotes because they were emblematic of what I found to be true for all participants.

One illustrative example was provided by Rebecca, a 4(3) knower. As a reminder, she was a second-year principal of a large urban high school who worked for six years as assistant principal of the same school. When I asked her to compare her responsibilities as an assistant principal with that of a principal, she said:

Before, my areas of priority were really clear, and they are now too but in a different way. I feel like I had the time before to do each of those things well… And now there are many more things for which I’m responsible because I’m responsible for the whole school and I can’t do all of them myself. So, part of what I’ve really had to learn and think about, and I’m still wading through, is what are the things that I have to do? What should other people do instead of me, and how do I support those people in doing that?

In this quote, what stands out is how her priorities now as a principal were really clear for Rebecca. She recognized that she has many more responsibilities she’s “responsible for the whole school” – but she also articulated how she “can’t do all of them by myself.” It’s not easy to have so many different roles, and that it “takes mental energy” to recognize that she can’t always attend to everything. In contrast with the predominantly socializing knowers in my study, Rebecca learned how to delegate and also how to support people. She was able to ask herself, “when do I need to be the person responding? When can someone else be the person responding? When do I have to get involved? When can I pass it along?” For her, delegating was not just passing on the responsibilities, but it also meant that she thought about “when do I need to be involved to coach someone in learning how to respond to a situation?”
Later on, in the same interview, she said that “it’s different when you’re the principal than when you’re an assistant principal, in terms of just you’re the person whose final responsibility rests with you.” She saw this as an area where she had grown and was no longer feeling as torn. Rebecca’s capacity for self-authorship can be seen in how she took a perspective on the larger, more complex decision-making system that she needed to account for as principal. In contrast, her socializing remnant can be seen in how she was still feeling a bit torn, just less so over time.

An example similar to Rebecca’s can be seen in how Kelly made sense of her experiences. Recall that Kelly was a third-year principal of a mid-sized suburban middle school in a largely affluent neighborhood and whose developmental score was also 4(3). In the anecdote from Kelly that I shared earlier in this chapter, she shared how she did not know how to respond when a parent came to ask for her child to get home-tutoring. As she was retelling that story, she reflected on the unfamiliar situation. She said, “So not having the answer [in the moment] unnerved me, but I was able to still be present and keep the meeting moving forward.” We see here that she was momentarily “unnerved” but was able to recover when facing the complexity of her breadth of responsibilities as principal.

Regina, the only pure self-authoring knower in my study, had a quick and unequivocal answer when I asked her to tell me about her job responsibilities. As a reminder, Regina was a third-year principal of a small urban elementary charter school who held multiple roles in the same school prior to becoming principal in that school. She said, “I think it’s definitely to be an instructional leader, pared-down, whether that’s happening day to day with the things that happen is another thing, but, definitely, I think of my role as being an instructional leader.” When I asked her to explain more, Regina articulated how she did not feel pulled by many of the
exact things that the socializing knowers in my study mentioned as challenges, such as the breadth of operations details like bussing and budgeting, because she had structured her leadership team by design to allow her to better focus on her priority of leading instruction.

Regina said, “I do a lot of the budgeting stuff with my director of operations, but she really is the one who’s handling most of that.” Regina also structured her student support team to direct student discipline issues through her counseling staff, which she likened to a series of stops on a train. Regina shared:

Everyone, when I tell them I’m a principal, they’re like, ‘What?’ And then they say, ‘So all the bad kids get sent to you.’ And that’s actually not what we do at my school. When students have challenges in their room, they will see Veronica first. She’s our Director of Student and Family Affairs. I’m not the first stop on that train. I’m usually the last stop if it gets to the point of suspension or something.

With this system in place, Regina told me, “I’m elbow-deep [in managing student discipline], but I’m not fully in it.” It is important to note that Regina has a charter management organization (CMO) backing her school, which shifted some of the operations work named by other principals as adding complexity. But, because she implemented a system that reflected her values, Regina said, “I’m not touching it as much as [you might] think [I] do, which I think does free me up to be more instructional facing.” For Regina, the added breadth of responsibilities meant that she had more to supervise but not that she had to be the one that was in the weeds, trying to prioritize, delegate on the fly, or solve each of the problems that arose.

**District politics.** I found an additional dimension of the breadth of responsibilities, that of grappling with larger district politics, which was named only by Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, the participants who were self-authoring knowers (4 of 4) and no participants who were
predominantly socializing in their way of knowing (0 of 4). Why might this be? Self-authoring knowers can take a more complex perspective on the systems in which they live. Here, the school is in a more extensive system where district leadership and district politics can influence the system. It is possible that making strategic decisions would be significant stretches for a primarily socializing knower. I share brief anecdotes from Lauren and Regina, chosen to illustrate this finding because they best illustrated the additional complexity of district politics named by all four predominantly self-authoring knowers.

Lauren and Kelly, the two predominantly self-authoring knowers who were suburban principals at the time of our interviews, both named the additional complexities of working with the Board of Education in their respective districts. Rebecca and Regina, who worked in large, urban districts with multiple layers of politics, did not specifically name politics involving the Board of Education. At the time of our interviews, Lauren, the first-year principal of a mid-sized suburban high school in a largely affluent neighborhood, had worked as an assistant principal in three different suburban school districts. She noted that working with the superintendent and the board was something she had to learn because they had an enormous impact on the running of the school. She told me she had to determine whether or not she could see them as “partners and communicators.” As she was looking for her current job, she explicitly asked questions about the board of education. She told me:

I guess I had never really thought that much when I transitioned roles, about how important understanding what the board is like and what the superintendent’s relationship with the board is like where you work. So, by the time I got to where I am now, that was a question that I knew to start exploring and asking through the interview process because I knew that was something that would be important.
Lauren said that when she compared the three boards of education, she noticed the critical distinction was “how the superintendent positions him or herself with the board and what that meant for the building administrators.” Lauren further shared:

For example, in the first place, if the board has open access to the administrators to come in the building at any time or email the administrators directly, that was the culture that the superintendent set. But in another setting, it was very much the board could talk to us at any time, but the superintendent was the clearinghouse for any kind of communication among the administrators and their board members, so that was a very different tone.

In my analysis, as a predominantly self-authoring knower, Lauren was able to step back and observe the relationship to pick up on its dynamics while also holding in mind the implications it had on her work as a school administrator.

Rebecca, a second-year principal of a large urban high school who had worked for six years as assistant principal at that same school, similarly described this type of political complexity when sharing her challenges in reflecting on the stresses present for her district supervisor and how those stresses make her job more complex. Rebecca shared how she manages this particular kind of complexity among the breadth of her responsibilities in this way:

You have to know what your superintendent really cares about and tell by what your superintendent is reacting to. I learned how to manage what he called the ‘white noise,’ which is all of the information that’s coming to you that you have to pay attention to, but you can’t fixate on or allow you to be too emotionally thrown, or it gets in the way of you focusing on young people’s learning.

Rebecca had to consider how district initiatives might impact her school and work to “bridge” toward her district supervisor (Honig & Hatch, 2004), whose own stresses and political
imperatives she told me she tracked and accounted for. Her ability to take perspective on the school and district, as a system, as an object, and make strategic decisions, as a result, would require significant stretches for a primarily socializing knower. Based on what I have found, it may be that a principal needs to be predominantly self-authoring in their way of knowing to take a productive perspective on how district politics may affect their building leadership and adjust accordingly.

**Managing Interpersonal Conflict**

I found that the participants in my study faced the second kind of complexity in their transition to the principalship, that of being responsible for managing interpersonal conflict. This type of complexity lived within the strands of the breadth of responsibilities they faced in their transition, the first type of complexity that I described in the previous section. As they became principals, the participants in my study (8 of 8) each told me how they took up the mantle of authority inherent in the principalship, which, in turn, affected the relationships that they had with others. As they became principals, I also found that participants also had to juggle a greater number of relationships with others (8 of 8). They each described how relationships became complicated because they desired reciprocal and collaborative relationships, but they quickly realized that they were operating in a system where hierarchical and supervisory relationships were the norm (8 of 8). A summary of these findings for this section, with participants noted, can be seen in Table 5.4.
Managing Interpersonal Conflict According to the Development of Each Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers</th>
<th>Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOI score = 3, 3(4), and 3/4</strong></td>
<td><strong>SOI score = 4/3, 4(3), 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The new relationship dynamics caused them to feel stressed and drained (4 of 4) David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4</td>
<td>- They fully understood that as leaders, they were expected to engage in difficult discussions with others in their school (4 of 4) Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- They felt lonely and described themselves as outsiders in the work (3 of 4) Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4</td>
<td>- Unafraid to take on conflicts, and expressed confidence that conflicts can be productive (4 of 4) Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common findings for all participants (8 of 8)</td>
<td>- Some also described managing relationships in a bidirectional way, understanding the transition affected not only how others saw them but how they saw others (3 of 4) Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Participants said that as they took on a greater breadth of responsibilities in the transition, it affected their relationships with others in the school, and they had many more relationships to juggle.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Participants described that relationships become complicated because they desired reciprocal and collaborative relationships, but they quickly realized that they were operating in a system where hierarchical and supervisory relationships were the norm.</td>
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Critically, I also found that this type of complexity was experienced in very different ways by participants with differing ways of knowing. David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), the participants who were predominantly socializing knowers, largely described these new relationships in terms of how it impacted them: how they, internally, felt about this change and how demanding it was on them (4 of 4). Carlos, Jesse, and Tamara all said that they felt lonely and drained from this work and described themselves as outsiders, coming into a new school and not knowing the workings of the school (3 of 4). Those who were self-authoring knowers, in contrast, talked considerably less about the challenge of managing relationships. They told me how they fully understood and appreciated that, as leaders, the expectation from others is that they are leading and engaging in difficult discussions with others in the school (4 of 4). Regina (score = 4), Rebecca (4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), and Lauren (4(3)), the participants who were predominantly self-authoring in their way of knowing, were unafraid to take on conflicts (4 of 4), and they expressed confidence in how to do this work, reflective of
their well-established capacity to take perspective on each interpersonal or team conflict and hold it as an object (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012; Kegan, 1982, 1994).

Additionally, some of the self-authoring knowers described their new position in a bidirectional way, by which I mean describing themselves in relation to their assistant principals and in relation to their supervisors in the district central office (3 of 4). These self-authoring knowers articulated, in a way that no socializing knowers did, that this transition to more complex relationships went in multiple directions, generalized across multiple relationships up and down the hierarchy of the school.

To support this claim, I first share how participants, regardless of their way of knowing, described how they managed interpersonal conflicts as they transitioned to become principals. Then I detail how participants who were predominantly socializing knowers described their experiences with managing interpersonal conflict before sharing how predominantly self-authoring knowers described the same challenges in very different ways. I then close this section with a brief discussion.
Common Descriptions of Complexity Arising from Interpersonal Conflict

The first type of complexity I described in this chapter, a *breadth of responsibility* that significantly added to the complexity in the transition to the principalship, was inherent in how principals have to pay attention to the entire enterprise, from instruction to operations, budgeting, and hiring, bussing, and athletics. Within these strands, there was a second kind of complexity that these principals described that arose from managing other adults and managing interpersonal conflict. In their role as the school principal, all participants explained that they were newly seen by other adults as the authority figure who drove decision-making (8 of 8). This manifested in a few ways. Participants told me how, as the final supervisor, they had a responsibility to lead hard conversations (8 of 8), give critical feedback (8 of 8), and sometimes fire an unsuccessful teacher (4 of 8). In this subsection, I draw out common descriptions of this kind of complexity, anchored by anecdotes from Carlos, Rebecca, and Regina chosen because they were emblematic of what was shared by all participants.

Carlos, the first-year principal of a small urban high school who was drawn to the school because of its focus on serving newly-arrived immigrants, shared one example of this phenomenon when he described what it was like for him to take on the mantle of authority inherent in the principalship: “I think the hardest part in terms of stepping into this role and going from an AP to a principal role is the human resources or employee relations part of it... I had some of that responsibility as an assistant principal, but ultimately the principal is the one having the hard employee relation conversations with staff.” For Carlos, having difficult conversations with the staff was the principal's responsibility and a milestone in his transition from the assistant principal. Carlos told me that the most important difference in his transition was “the ultimate responsibility” that rests with the principal and no one else.
Rebecca, a second-year principal of a large urban high school who had worked for six years as assistant principal at that same school, described a similar struggle when she spoke about the expanded scope of these different difficult conversations – that this was not just about managing difficult conversations with teachers, but it also came up in so many other ways. Rebecca told me about a time she had to have “a disciplinary meeting with a staff member who had done something or said something that was unprofessional or potentially harmful to a colleague or a student.” Another example she shared was “working with the teaching team to get them to shift the way that they were thinking about their practice.” The third kind of difficult conversation was “responding to situations where a student was in crisis, or there was a parent who was upset.” Rebecca shared that difficult conversations were often happening with individual teachers, teacher teams, students, and parents. She told me that she knew that the stakes were high, saying that “these difficult conversations affect individuals in a very real way, powerful way. And it has implications for the school as a whole.”

Rebecca shared that she had had some of these experiences as an assistant principal. She said that they helped prepare her for the principalship but that when she was an assistant principal, “there was always someone else that you can go to. I could tell [the other adult] ‘I’m not sure’ or ‘I don’t know,’ or ‘I’m trying to help you with this, but if you’re really not satisfied, you have to talk to…’ and now I can’t do that. So, there’s an element of, whatever it is, I need to be able to come through for us, to be able to come to a resolution around this… I need to be the person to make sure this is handled.”

A final example of principals describing the challenge of dealing with interpersonal conflicts came from Regina, who was a third-year principal of a small urban elementary charter school and had held multiple roles in the same school prior to becoming principal. Similar to
Carlos and Rebecca, Regina shared that she spent a significant amount of time as a principal navigating the relationships in the school building. Regina shared that managing people was the most challenging part of her job:

I still think the people, management of people is the hardest part of this job. You can create trends of what happens when you learn more from experience, but I think there is the work with people - courting, coaching, supervising, inspiring people is, I definitely think, the hardest part of this role.

An additional form of complex interpersonal relationships occurred for these participants (3 of 8) when an internal assistant principal who competed for the same principal position was still working in the school. For example, Lauren told me how she was an outside candidate for the principal position and ultimately won the job over the internal assistant principal also applying for the same job. Lauren described this new relationship as “awkward initially, while I’m trying to build a relationship with him.”

**Predominantly Socializing Knowers and Managing Interpersonal Conflict**

“*And now, I am the Other. I am their boss.*” – David

I found that David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), the four participants who were predominantly socializing knowers, described a similar struggle with the complexity of interpersonal conflict as they transitioned to become principals, and in a way that diverged from how self-authoring knowers described this challenge. Predominantly socializing knowers primarily described their new role in how it impacted them: how they, internally, felt about this change and how demanding it was on them (4 of 4). When asked to name the most difficult challenge in the transition from assistant principal to principal, this particular type of
complexity, that of adjusting to increased interpersonal conflict, was especially prominent for socializing knowers (4 of 4).

This type of complexity arose for all four of these participants who were socializing knowers in the context of human resource (HR) discussions, by which I mean discussions around terminations and disciplinary meetings with staff. Carlos and Jesse described challenges in managing interpersonal conflict solely in the context of HR discussions, while David and Tamara also named an additional facet in this challenge, which was their struggle to meet others’ expectations of them in their new role as principals. David and Tamara both said that others wanted them to be decisive and looked to them to be the authority figure, while they just wanted to maintain the collaborative stance that had served them well as assistant principals.

Finally, I found that there was a qualitative difference among how these four participants described their experience with the complexity of managing interpersonal conflict, according to whether they were purely socializing (a developmental score of 3) compared to those who were predominantly socializing (a score of 3(4) or 3/4). I first share an anecdote from David, the only purely socializing knower at the time of our interviews, who described his experience solely in terms of how he related to others. I then use anecdotes from Tamara’s and Carlos’s transitions to the principalship to illustrate the experiences in managing conflict of socializing knowers who were at least partly self-authoring.

David, a purely socializing knower, was a K-8 urban principal operating in the shadow of the previous principal who had been there for over 30 years. He clearly described how the complexity of interpersonal conflict was distinct from the complexity arising from learning new domains and systems. David shared:
In the past three years, I think that I could have become a Maven of HR and budgeted and getting all that stuff on top of it. So, the things that I definitely had to learn a lot about too, but in terms of the big picture for my school, I think if I did not build relationships or see, and whatever that cost me as a person or as an administrator, then I think all the other stuff would have been learned for not.

Here, David saw his interpersonal relationships as the foundation of his leadership as principal, even more than all the new systems learning that he also needed to do. For David, what was especially hard about the job of being a new principal was not that the “budgeting was hitting you hard” but that “establishing rapport and trust with staff;” this, he explained, was something he had to work on over time. When reflecting on his first year, David said that it was “rouglier than any other year because I had to establish my reputation and part of that you could have the best intentions of the best instructional practices and all that stuff, great relationship building, but it’s not going to come together that first year. It was because you have no history with anybody.” When asked to define this particular challenge, David said that “I have a particular way of relating to the people I work with. And now, I am the Other. I am their supervisor and their boss. This is just a different relationship, and it is challenging and hard to manage.” This identity of being the “other” is especially challenging for David as a purely socializing knower because he makes sense of himself through the perspective of important others and, thus, feeling othered can be threatening to the self (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012; Kegan, 1982, 1994).

At the time of our interview, David was in his third year as a principal, and he felt like he has been able to get better at managing people over the past three years. David said:

You know, obviously, there are some parts of the job that suck, and you just have to do it.

People work, parent communication, all of that’s part of it, but being able to
communicate that message without making them feel crap or just say, ‘I’m the boss,’ for me, is important. Because I consider myself as intimidating as a gummy bear, so I’m not going to be able to threaten anybody into working, but I still need them to work, so it’s about sort of gently coercing them into the work that they don’t necessarily want to do.

In this quote, David described how he wanted to sit and listen collaboratively when others wanted him to decide and move forward. As a purely socializing knower, David seemed to be judging himself based on the rapport he had with his staff.

As a predominately socializing knower who has some capacity for self-authorship, Carlos (score of 3/4) wrestled with how he would handle difficult human resource conversations but, unlike David, expressed a growing comfort level with being the boss. Carlos told me how he knows that as a principal, he is now on a different “side,” and he’s going to “be here alone.” He articulated to me how he has to be the leader and authority for his staff but expressed that he would have liked additional support in managing challenging interpersonal situations, especially the first time around.

Carlos said that he does not mind being the primary decision-maker when it comes to curriculum or budget or things of that sort, but that it has been challenging when it comes to staff issues. He said, “I didn’t realize that [HR] was going to take that much time and energy.” Carlos told me about a conversation with the associate superintendent in which he got coaching about making an HR decision:

That’s where in talking, having that coaching conversation with my supervisor, she says, “At some point, you’re going to step out of the office, and employee relations is going to ask you what you want to do with this person. Cut them or keep them, and you have to make that decision.” I’m fine with that.
These kinds of coaching conversations, Carlos told me, were vital supports for him, but he wished for someone else in authority to share the burden with him at the outset. He described another situation in which he wanted to discuss the potential termination of a staff member. When he asked the central office associate superintendent “if she would be there” for the conversation, he shared that:

She’s like, ‘No. You’re it.’ And I feel like that’s great. That comes with the job. But when you’re new, make sure you’re getting it right too... I definitely have the support of my supervisor in preparing for those conversations. But then it feels a little lonely once you’re doing the thing. So, that’s been hard.

However, he also said immediately after, “In a way, I wish that somebody was there to go ride along with me for the first one. But that’s not how we do it. So, I think that level of support in terms of coaching would be something I think would probably be beneficial.” In this retelling, Carlos expressed that “I understand that it comes with the territory and the role, and I’ll do it. I’m ready.” And at the same time, “it’s mostly about the reflection piece. It’s not like I can’t make the decision, but just somebody to be able to bounce the ideas off of, and it’s a cold scenario.” This revealed to me how Carlos making sense of the complexity of managing interpersonal conflict: the self-authoring part of him recognizes that he has to be the person to make these decisions, but the dominant socializing way of knowing cannot shake the feeling of loneliness in taking on this mantle of authority, wishing he could get a supervisor’s approval or validation, or even just another person to “bounce the ideas off of.” This is consistent with what I would expect from a predominantly socializing knower, who primarily makes sense of his world through the eyes of important others while his own internal benchmarks develop (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012; Kegan, 1982, 1994).
Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers and Managing Interpersonal Conflict

In contrast with the predominantly socializing principals in the previous section, I found that Lauren (score = 4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), Rebecca (4(3)), and Regina (4), the participants with a predominantly self-authoring way of knowing, talked considerably less about the challenge of managing interpersonal conflicts. I found these participants fully understood and appreciated that, as leaders, the expectation from others is that they are leading and engaging in difficult discussions with others in the school (4 of 4). Predominantly self-authoring participants described how they were unafraid to take on conflicts. They expressed confidence in doing this work, reflecting their capacity to take perspective on each interpersonal or team conflict and hold it as object (4 of 4). Additionally, Kelly, Rebecca, Regina described their new position in a bidirectional way, by which I mean describing themselves in relation to their assistant principals and in relation to their supervisors in the district central office (3 of 4). Self-authoring knowers' reflection on their transition articulated, in a way that no socializing knowers did, that this transition to more complex relationships went in multiple directions, generalized across multiple relationships up and down the hierarchy of the school.

I support these claims with rich examples from Regina, Kelly, and Rebecca. I chose anecdotes from Regina and Kelly to illustrate the systems and processes they said they used to manage interpersonal conflict to illuminate how they understood this complex part of their work. I close this section by sharing how Rebecca described her journey in moving from someone who was conflict-averse to becoming a principal who sees conflict as an opportunity to strengthen relationships and grow the school.

Regina, the only participant who was evaluated as fully self-authoring, articulated a clear set of approaches to resolving interpersonal conflict in accordance with her values and just
needed to invest the time and patience to see it through. Regina, a third-year principal of a small urban elementary charter school who held multiple roles in the same school before becoming principal, shared with me an anecdote about a complicated situation involving the teaching team for the pre-K at her school. The fix required her to make some staffing changes, and it was an “all hands on deck situation” that required “coaches, a district director, and assistant director.” When she was describing this difficult “reset,” she said that:

And I think the thing that was really successful about that reset was; we just went at it really hard for three weeks. And it was the number one thing in my day to be in that room, talk to the teachers, to whatever it was, talks to our network, figure out what we need to do next? Get really granular with it… It’s not going to go away. If you don’t address it, you’re making a bigger problem for yourself and for everyone else.

It was clear that Regina, who was a fully self-authoring knower, was not bothered by managing difficult conversations or concerned about how others saw her. For her, the solution was getting in there and getting it done. She says that this problem took “that level of being in there and developing a day-to-day plan. You can get to the place where you’ve got a system, culture, expectation set up, but it requires a lot.” Regina was not afraid of the tensions that this may have caused between her and the teachers in those classrooms. She had a system that she believed in. In fact, as she said, “if you don’t address it, you’re making a bigger problem for yourself.” She had a strong belief in her way of approaching it, and following through on that approach made it successful.

Similarly, Kelly, a third-year principal of a mid-sized suburban middle school in a largely affluent neighborhood who had worked in the same school as an assistant principal, talked about using a process to move the school. She said that she learned a great deal from other role models
that she had had. She says this of Eric, the previous principal that she had worked closely with:

“Eric was relentless when he wanted his decision implemented, and that taught me that I couldn’t feel bad, and someone’s always going to complain about it, so I pursue my vision with fidelity.”

Kelly also shared that she learned a great deal from the superintendent and assistant superintendent about keeping the staff growing. She knew that she “needed refinement on how to bring the team together and how to have confidence in pushing a team,” but she knew the “use of protocols” or other “multi-step process” to move the departments in her school.

When the expert developmental psychologist Dr. Popp asked Kelly to describe more about how she handles conflict in their interview, Kelly said:

Any interaction with someone is an opportunity to build a relationship. And actually, I just see that when there’s a conflict, it’s an opportunity to have an honest conversation, show who you are and what you stand for. It’s not about power, or it’s not about being right. It’s about finding a solution and addressing a situation that might need to change, and finding out what’s underlying and how to move forward together.

In this quote, I noted how Kelly articulated her own theory, values, and standards, demonstrating her capacity to see the complexity and nuance, and multiple perspectives within a particular issue. Kelly understood that “having hard conversations that are honest and real” was the key to building community and building relationships. She told me: “I see conflict as an opportunity to build relationships as much as positive interactions can build relationships. It’s how you follow up with people. It’s the principal—it’s my role. The principal is primary when it comes to building community. If I believe in people, and if I believe in community… then it’s my role to set up avenues and structures to meetings and thought projects to support and do interactions.”

This is a powerful example of the self-authoring way of knowing—where Kelly articulated what
she believed, how she saw her own role, and what she saw as her responsibilities. All of it self-contained and internally generated, reflective of her predominantly self-authoring way of knowing (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012; Kegan, 1982, 1994).

The most powerful and clear example of how this was different for a self-authoring knower came from Rebecca, a second-year principal of a large urban high school who had worked for six years as assistant principal at that same school. Through the expert developmental assessment, I knew that Rebecca was a self-authoring knower with remnants of socializing (score of 4(3)). Like Kelly and Regina, Rebecca told me how she could confront the challenges in handling staff with systems and processes. Rebecca said this about her first year:

I hate having disciplinary meetings with teachers and colleagues. Absolutely hate it. It’s painful for me. I have to push myself even to send the letter. I have to plan the conversation ahead of time and figure out what my talking points are. I have also to try to remember this is a process, and I’m going through the process. Oh god, the first time I had to do them, it was so, so, so hard. I would not have chosen to do it. I would have preferred it if somebody else had done it. It would never have been a thing I ever would have wanted to do or would have seen myself doing. Now I understand that having those kinds of meetings is one of my responsibilities and part of my job. It’s part of being a principal or an assistant principal in the [very large urban district]. It’s a way that potential professional issues are handled.

In this quote, Rebecca articulated that even though disciplinary meetings are painful for her and that she has to plan ahead of time, she saw this as a process and a core part of her job to resolve potential professional issues. She had adjusted and made peace with it.
Conflicts also arose from how a group made decisions and what role the school principal played in the decision-making process. As a reminder, in the previous section about predominantly socializing knowers, I shared how Tamara described the kinds of expectations her staff had of her to “make the decision” when Tamara preferred a more collaborative decision-making approach. We also heard from David, who found ways to “gently coerced” people into doing things they might not want to do.

Rebecca stood out to me as a powerful counterpoint to Tamara’s and David’s experiences as predominantly socializing knowers. Rebecca told me that she had enough experience as an AP and entered with “mastery” about how to lead a school with an “inquiry-based stance.” By this, she meant that she could focus on her teachers' work and the professional development committee. She says, “I didn’t necessarily dictate what we were going to focus on, but I did determine how we were going to work together. I also was clear about the parameters of the group, in terms of what it could work on and what it could do.” She was able to be clear about: “Here are the things that it’s important that we all are in agreement on. Here are the times where I’m going to decide, and also, this is how we’re going to work together.” For Rebecca, she “had enough of an internal sense by that point of what the group should decide and what the leadership team and I should decide, because of all the practice I’d had.” Because of the practice, she was able to have as an AP in dealing with smaller-scale things, she “had a clear vision of this is how we’re going to work together, and I had a wide enough toolkit that I could facilitate in a really deliberate way and still be responsive to what was emerging from the group.” Rebecca’s approach is a powerful contrast to that of Tamara and David.

Rebecca was also someone familiar with the research on adult developmental theory. She said, thinking back on her time as an assistant principal:
I definitely remember having conversations about being a socializing knower and needing not to care that much about what people thought but care more about what I thought and what I thought was the right thing to do. I had enough experiences over time where I had to be okay with someone maybe not being super happy with something that I decided, but standing with that decision because I felt that it was the right thing to do… Not that it ever felt good or will necessarily feel good, because I am a social person, but being okay with conflict and actually using conflict as something to learn from rather than shy away from.”

She recognized that she’s “a social person” but that she needed to use “conflict as something to learn from.” In my analysis, Rebecca was demonstrating here her capacity to hold multiple thoughts and feelings and reactions of her own toward the situation and, at the same time, hold her understanding of the perspectives that others have. This balancing of multiple and competing perspectives is evidence of the self-authoring structure. She was able to hold, manage, prioritize, and be strategic within this situation's sensitivity and complexity, fully demonstrating her self-authoring capacities. That she could step outside the situation to look at her own actions and decisions and critique them was clear evidence of a fully functioning self-authoring system. This is a clear contrast with how the four socializing knowers in my study experienced interpersonal conflicts.

I close this section with one of the most powerful things I heard from Rebecca about how she now sees conflicts:

The lesson that conflict and tension are actually productive and are good to engage in if done well. My family avoids conflict. It’s like I don’t enjoy it. It makes me feel really stressed out internally. I would prefer not to have to participate in it by nature, but really
my default would be that, but actually, I learned as an assistant principal, and I have to say even more now in the principal role for the past year that we need to pay attention to tension, and we need to pay attention to conflict, and they don’t have to... They’re not going to destroy us, and they’re not going to destroy our relationships. We can actually navigate them in ways that help all of us to learn and that strengthen our relationships, and that strengthen us as individuals.

I’m now much more likely, even in my own life, my personal life, to raise matters that I believe are going to either lead to conflict or to name conflicts, to insist that we really talk this through and don’t avoid it. I’m committed to seeing the work through, being in a relationship with people in ways that aren’t just roses and flower fields, but hard at times, and really sticking with it together. I know how to do that a lot better now than I used to, and I do think it’s made me a much better person and stronger person and more whole and fulfilled person, not just in my professional life, but in my personal life too. It really changed me. Really, really changed me.

This is something that took her time to develop. For her, both as an AP and as a principal, Rebecca described how much her management of interpersonal conflict changed as she moved from being conflict-avoidant to seeing conflict and tension as productive. This shift, she said, helped her become a “more whole and fulfilled person.” Rebecca told me that this does not mean that you lose your own perspective or stance but that this is a way of “truly being respectful of people and hearing them out, but also being clear with yourself and with the people that you’re working with.”

In closing, I note that the participants who were predominantly self-authoring each had their ways of managing the increasing complexities of managing interpersonal conflict. They
each described managing interpersonal conflict as one of the significant adjustments they had to
deal with as part of their transition, but they managed it with clarity about systems and processes
they said they found helpful. Finally, through Rebecca’s journey, we see what kind of shift in
meaning-making school leaders need to make to move from conflict-averse to seeing conflict not
only as a necessary but productive tool in their professional and personal lives.

Clarifying Internal Values

So far in this chapter, I have described two types of complexity that marked the transition
to the principalship of the eight school leaders I interviewed, those of the increased breadth of
responsibilities they had as principals and the strands of managing interpersonal conflict that
arose within those responsibilities. I found a third and final type of complexity inherent in
managing these first two: all participants but David (score = 3) named the need to increasingly
clarify their own internal values as part of their transition (7 of 8). I learned from all of the
participants in my study that they had to develop a complex understanding of themselves in order
to be able to meet the challenges of leading. Participants in the study all previously thought of
themselves as collaborative leaders and not someone who dictates to others (8 of 8), and they had
to grapple with that conceptualization and learn to adjust their self-image as a leader in order to
meet the needs of the school. This finding emerged as a theme for all participants when I asked
them to envision that they were mentoring someone else who would undergo this transition to
the principalship. I present a summary of the findings for this section, with participants noted, in
Table 5.5.

Importantly, I also found differences in how this internal work looked and functioned
depended on each participant's way of knowing. Of the predominantly socializing knowers,
Jesse (score = 3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4) (3 of 4) described this type of complexity
less readily but reflected on this challenge when prompted. They frequently told me that their advice to school leaders transitioning to the principalship would be to clarify their own values in advance (4 of 4). I found that the participants who were predominantly socializing knowers also felt that this work involved quite a bit of risk (4 of 4). For example, Jesse, whose developmental score at the time of our interviews was 3(4) and therefore was just beginning to develop his capacity for self-authorship, described a risk of “assimilation” – that if he weren’t careful, he would be” the one to assimilate to a longstanding culture” and become an “executor of the status quo as opposed to being a leader of what they hired me to do.” I explore what was at stake for socializing knowers in more depth in the next subsection and offer consideration of why David’s experience may have been different from the other participants.

Table 5.5

Clarifying Internal Values According to the Development of Each Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers</th>
<th>Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOI score = 3, 3(4), and 3/4</td>
<td>SOI score = 4/3, 4(3), 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Made sense of what was important primarily through others’ reactions, judging their values by comparing them against how others in the school community would receive them (3 of 4): Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4</td>
<td>● To manage complexity arising from interpersonal conflict, they turned to their own values and beliefs. These personal beliefs allowed them to remain undeterred when confronted with contrary points of view (4 of 4) Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Recognized that leading with one’s values involved some level of risk (3 of 4): David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4</td>
<td>● Invested time in building their own clarity around their values and learned to communicate those values to the school community (4 of 4) Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Advised aspiring principals to clarify their values in advance. (4 of 4) David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4</td>
<td>● Learned to communicate district priorities as their own (2 of 4) Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common findings for all participants (8 of 8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Participants said that as they took on a greater breadth of responsibilities in the transition, they had to develop a complex understanding of themselves in order to be able to meet the challenges of leading.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Participants grappled with their desire to be collaborative leaders and learned to adjust their self-image as a leader in order to meet the needs of the school.</td>
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The participants who were predominantly self-authoring knowers, in contrast, articulated that the solution to the complexity arising from managing interpersonal conflict was to turn inside and clarify their own values and beliefs (4 of 4). More specifically, they did this internal
work by building their own clarity around their values as a leader, becoming “my own person,” and learning to communicate their values with clarity to the school community. This last part of the transition to the principal, which I came to think of as learning to grab the microphone, was characterized by “learn[ing] to articulate your values and figure out how to incorporate them into the school.”

In this section, I first share the descriptions of clarifying internal values common among all participants before exploring how predominantly socializing knowers and predominantly self-authoring knowers differed in how they approached this complex, internal work as part of their transition to the principalship.

**Common Descriptions of Complexity Arising from Clarifying Internal Values**

All eight participants spoke about the importance of clarifying their internal values as they transitioned into the principalship. They described it in terms of understanding oneself and said that it was important to learn to articulate your values and figure out how to incorporate them into the school. For example, Carlos said that “the first thing that matters most is knowing yourself as a leader. Knowing how you’re going to lead, and knowing how you’re going to develop your vision.” Similarly, Tamara said that she had to pick the top three things she wanted to ground her work in and stay true to those as she transitioned into the role. Regina also shared that she felt her best when she could be very clear about “what was important to me so that I could ground my decisions in that [and then turn] and explain those decisions to other people.’ In the next section, I share a general description of this transition through emblematic stories from Jesse, Carlos, and Kelly's, where they each describe having to clarify their own values so that they could lead with those values.
As I shared in the previous section, when I asked Jesse to share some of the things he had to learn in this transition, he cited HR and budgeting, and student discipline. As a reminder, Jesse was a second-year principal of a small suburban middle school who sought out a predominately White school district willing to work on issues of racial equity. Jesse explained that he knew how to implement a restorative justice-based approach to student discipline but that he “didn’t know where people stood; didn’t know their previous training; didn’t know how the community would receive it.” He was concerned and “uncomfortable not knowing how my techniques would be received.” In order to figure that out, he had to go through a lot of “trial and error.” For Jesse, he was concerned about the “fit” between his values and the school norms and expectations. To make forward progress, Jesse realized that he needed to have a “stronger internal voice.”

Jesse’s most powerful words of advice for an aspiring principal were to “encourage them to get really clear on some things that they stand for” because when someone is going to hire you, “they need to know who you are, and they need to cast a public vote of confidence for you.” Jesse is sharing his insight into what the hiring committee may have valued in him when they hired him as the principal of the school. Five of the eight participants voiced that the values they stood for were well understood by the school community and helped them get the principalship. In Jesse’s particular case, he believed that he was hired to help push a mostly White school district towards a greater understanding of racial injustices. He felt that he ultimately was a good fit and felt a sense of purpose there but recognized that “if you come in and are swimming against the tide and no one’s got your back, it’s a lonely job anyway, and it’s going to feel lonelier if no one is advocating for what you’re doing.”
As I asked participants to share what advice they would give to a future leader transitioning to the principalship, Carlos and Kelly, like Jesse above, both said that you had to “develop your vision” and “be ready to lead based on that vision.” Seven of eight participants voiced something very similar when I asked what the new aspiring principal needed to do. Carlos, the first-year principal of a small urban high school who was drawn to the school because of its focus on serving newly-arrived immigrants, began by saying that:

The first thing that matters most is knowing yourself as a leader. Knowing how you’re going to lead. Knowing how you’re going to develop your vision… I would say to the new AP becoming a principal, to know what your vision for teaching and learning is going to be because the school may already have a vision and mission statement and they’re operating under that, but as the leader, you’re going to be leading through those, and so, you have to know how that’s going to show up and how you’re going to do that. So, spend some time developing your understanding of yourself as a leader and how you’re going to lead.

Carlos, like Jesse, says that “you’re going to need to understand the school’s existing values and culture, but you won’t get anywhere without understanding yourself as a leader first and then figure out how you’ll be able to lead through [those values].” While in some ways Carlos and Kelly could not be more different – Carlos was a principal of a small urban public high school that was hired externally, and Kelly was a principal of a large suburban public middle school who was an internal hire – they had nearly identical statements when it comes to the importance of understanding one’s own vision. Here are Kelly’s words of advice for an aspiring principal:

You have to know where you would like to take the school, where do you believe philosophically your school should go. If you have a vision, and then if you’re a good
listener, and you talk with all the different constituents from all the different parts of the faculty, you can find ways that they buy into your vision.

Consistently, participants in my study underscored that it was important for principals to understand their values and know-how to communicate them. Those were key ingredients, they said, to find a school that is a good fit.

**Predominantly Socializing Knowers and Clarifying Internal Values**

While all participants described the importance of finding their leadership voice, I found that it was especially challenging for the participants who were predominately socializing knowers. This finding is aligned with research, which shows that one has to be able to elevate one’s own values and perspective to the point where one sees oneself as a central component of the school-as-system, but that this requires at least some capacity for self-authorship (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2016; Kegan, 1994).

More specifically, I found that the three socializing knowers who had some capacity for self-authorship, Jesse (score = 3(4)), Tamara (3/4), and Carlos (3/4), still primarily made sense of themselves in terms of what important others told them. They judged their values by comparing them against how those in the school community would receive them. In this section, I support these findings by sharing Tamara’s experiences and then Jesse’s because of their anecdotes’ richness. The one remaining case is David, a socializing knower without any self-authoring way of knowing at the time of our interviews (score=3). I describe his understanding at the end of this section as a different interesting case.

Tamara had spent twelve years as an assistant principal in the southeast before moving to the Midwest to become a new high school principal in an urban school district. At the time of our interviews, she felt she was still finding her voice and wanted to share the leadership of the
school with those adults. She expressed frustration at the adults in schools who just want the principal to tell them what to do and why. She shared that in her school, “for so long people have just thought, ‘Well, it’s whatever the principal wants. I just want them to tell me what to do, and I’ll do it,’ and that’s not how I lead or want to lead.” When there are conflicts in the school, Tamara wants them to resolve them independently and “not need the authority figure to come in and do it.” She categorizes this work as a struggle to “move away from this top-down mentality that has been in the culture for so long.”

Tamara was in her third year as principal at the time of our interviews, and she said that “I am still finding my own voice, and defining my own leadership style and just learning how to be a principal in [my city].” As a reminder, Tamara was someone who, at the time of our interviews, had both a socializing and a self-authoring structure, with the socializing way of knowing predominant (score = 3/4) as her meaning making system. She recognized that things at the school have “not run as seamlessly… as maybe if somebody who had been a principal before and had a better sense of their own leadership style and the culture that they were trying to create.” Whereas, she still spent a lot of time thinking to herself that “I know the culture that I want to create, but my bag of tricks to draw from, to help foster and teach that, isn’t as big as it will be five years from now.” In this quote, Tamara articulated an awareness that some principals had already built what she was hoping to create when she said things are not as running as seamlessly as someone who had a better sense of their leadership style. With fifteen combined years of experience as an assistant principal and AP, Tamara had the greatest number of years of school leadership experience of all of my participants. Yet, I note how her predominantly socializing way of knowing affected her ability to establish her own values and exert them as a
school principal. This was not a struggle with those participants in my study who had a predominantly self-authoring way of knowing.

When asked to give advice to a new principal in transition, Tamara encouraged these aspiring principals to consider:

Who are your go-to teachers on your staff going to be? Who do you trust? Whose opinion do you really want to listen to? Who’s going to come and shut your door and tell you when you’re doing something crazy or tell you what people are thinking or feeling? Just who are going to be those two or three people in your building that you want to place that trust in?

In this quote, I note how her self-authoring capacity can be seen in how Tamara knew that she needed to place some boundaries around her development and maintenance of her values. However, as someone for whom socializing knowing was predominant, she still made sense of herself in terms of what important others told her. So as a 3/4 knower with a fully formed self-authoring structure but a still dominant socializing way of knowing, Tamara exerted control over her values by selecting who she wanted to listen to in times of crisis, blending the two ways of knowing in a system that was effective for her and met her where she was at this point.

Tamara and Jesse had similar perspectives. As I mentioned earlier in the last chapter, Jesse, second-year principal of a small suburban middle school who felt drawn to his particular school and believed that he was hired to help bring about change in his school community in terms of how they handled racial conflicts. When he started in his school, he had to make sense of what people were expecting and then spent time processing his decisions when his approach revealed a misalignment with the existing culture. In reflecting on his role, he revealed that he thought “assimilation is a great risk factor here.” He recognized that as an outsider joining a new
school community, “I actually could be the one to assimilate to a longstanding culture.” He liked the people he was working with, saying that:

> These are well-intentioned people. These are great people. But if I assimilate to something that’s very comfortable, I’m becoming an executor of the status quo as opposed to a leader of what they said they hired me to do. And so instead, I have to stay conscious of that. And what I’m doing by learning my audience is not assimilating, but learning and plotting the path forward about how, over the next three years, we’re going to get to a place where my audience can see that this is a way to achieve their stated goals. So yeah, it is about learning the audience. But I think that’s the leadership question here: am I learning my audience to meet them where they’re at, or am I learning my audience so that I can know where they’re at and then guide them forward. That’s hard.

Here, Jesse’s way of knowing as a largely socializing knower (score = 3(4)) can be seen. As a reminder, Jesse was assessed at the time of our interviews by the expert developmental psychologist, Dr. Nancy Popp, as demonstrating a meaning system that is predominantly socializing with the beginning emergence of a self-authoring structure. If he were fully socializing, he would want to assimilate and adapt to the school's needs, as represented by the imperatives of the most important personalities in the faculty. His self-authoring side can be seen in holding an internal awareness of the reason the district hired him to bring a greater focus on cultural competency and social justice. However, these goals are those set upon him by the Board of Education, and he framed them as external and gives them power that he can use. If he were fully self-authoring, he would have held these goals internally without so much self-doubt or second thoughts. When Jesse said that he was “learning my audience to meet them where they’re at” and then corrected himself to say that he needs to do this in order to “guide them
forward,” we see the crux of his struggle as a largely socializing 3(4) knower: he knows he must do more than “assimilate” – he must “guide them” – and, for him given his way of knowing at the time of our interviews, “that’s hard.”

Jesse closed the discussion of this dynamic, noting that “loaded within there is, ‘This is not what I was expecting, and I’m uncomfortable.’ I have a duty to make people comfortable, but I also have a duty not to back away from what’s right, and what’s moral, and what’s our growth, even if people are uncomfortable in the meantime.” It pained Jesse to make people uncomfortable, but he felt a duty not to back away. His self-authoring way of knowing can be seen in his articulation of “what’s right” and “what’s moral,” which are internally-held values. But given that his socializing way of knowing is predominant, Jesse first found a district that had these values so that he could use those external goals posts, which did align with his own, to pull himself in the direction he wanted to go. I suspect that if he had been in a different school district that did not give him the institutional backing and support for the racial equity work, he might have had a much tougher time leading this way. Jesse implicitly acknowledged here that he might not have been able to do this leadership work independently and so happily sought a district that was aligned with his less dominant self-authoring way of knowing.

I end this section by describing David's perspective, whose experience was different from any other participant in my sample. David (score = 3), a third-year principal of a large urban K-8 school who took over for a principal who had been there for over 30 years, was the only pure socializing knower in my study. David did not describe finding his own leadership voice over several hours of interviews. The closest thing he said was this:

I think for me, understanding the school's culture, understanding who my informal leaders are, who will jump on board for an initiative, who’s going to throw it away
yesterday’s trash, and how am I going to message… If you understand at least some broad strokes about the school a little bit better, then at least I can frame how you’re going to achieve your goal.

This is revelatory to me because he does not articulate the importance of leading with his own values but only that it’s important for him to build good relationships so that he could change other people’s minds. This quote from David makes me think that relationship-building is a real strength for him and is the primary way for him to get tasks done in the school. In the Subject-Object Interview conducted by the expert developmental psychologist, Dr. Nancy Popp, David also said that he has “learned to own who I am …. I’m not a strong-willed person. I’m not somebody who’s gonna go against the grain unless I’m really invested in, like deeply invested. So, I am a compliance person by nature.” With only one participant who was a pure socializing knower in my sample, it is hard to draw any conclusions, but it is consistent with constructive-developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012; Kegan, 1982, 1994) that socializing knowers are not able to contextualize themselves within the system and do not elevate their own beliefs and mindset when working with others. I say more in Chapters VI and VII about how school districts might be able to support socializing knowers such as David.

**Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers and Clarifying Internal Values**

I found that the experiences of Regina (4), Rebecca (4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), and Lauren (4(3)), the four participants who were predominantly self-authoring knowers, differed from the experiences of predominantly socializing knowers in that they could clearly articulate the importance of their personal beliefs about leadership and could remain undeterred when challenged or confronted with contrary points of view (4 of 4). Additionally, self-authoring knowers described how, as part of their transition, they learned to clarify their own voices in
relation to the larger educational system as a whole. For example, Regina and Rebecca told me that they learned to communicate charter or district initiatives as their own, even when they disagreed with them. Rebecca told me how she learned how to bring her staff along by soliciting their feedback and incorporating their voice while keeping the new initiative grounded in her own language and values. Participants who were predominantly socializing knowers, by contrast, described how these scenarios were open-ended challenges to them that they struggled to solve. To help illuminate how these predominantly self-authoring participants understood how they used their internal values to manage the complexities of their transition to the principalship, I share two emblematic examples, one from a predominantly self-authoring knower, Rebecca, and one from a purely self-authoring knower, Regina.

Rebecca, a second-year principal of a large urban high school who had worked for six years as assistant principal at that same school, described one of her key accomplishments in her first year: leading the professional development committee in the school. Rebecca said,

I entered the role with mastery in that area… what that allowed me to do was to focus on the work of the group. I didn’t necessarily dictate what we were going to focus on, but I did determine how we would work together. I was also clear about the group's parameters in terms of what it could work on and what it could do… There were certain elements of the work that we came to a consensus around, but there were also things that I decided and that the leadership team decided, and I was able to be clear about, “Here are the things that it’s important that we all are in agreement on. Here are the times where I’m going to decide, and also, this is how we’re going to work together.”

This was a potentially challenging setup for Rebecca – the group was making important school-wide decisions that would affect the group's culture, and there was a desire to establish
consensus. As a predominantly self-authoring knower, she set clear boundaries and negotiated the decision-making process with deliberateness. In fact, she shared that:

I had enough of an internal sense by that point of what the group should decide and what I and the leadership team should decide because of all the practice I’d had… I had a clear vision of ‘this is how we’re going to work together,’ and I had a wide enough toolkit that I could facilitate in a really deliberate way and still be responsive to what was emerging from the group.

Rebecca was able to use her experiences and her vision to help guide this group forward. A principal with a more socializing way of knowing might have struggled more with these kinds of interactions. Rebecca, as a predominantly self-authoring knower, had “the internal sense” of what the decision should be and a “toolkit” she could employ in service to her “clear vision.”

I conclude this section by discussing Regina (score = 4), the pure self-authoring knower in my study, a third-year principal of a small urban elementary charter school whose school belonged to a charter school network. She worked closely with the district leadership that supervised all of the charter schools, and as such, Regina said that as a principal, “you get a lot of directives.” For example, “this has to happen, or this is where we’re moving.” Regina shared that she must be able to “narrate those [directives] for teachers where it doesn’t create this division between teachers and one another.” This was important to Regina because she told me that she knew that she had to interpret and present to her staff the district leadership's directives in her own language. In what Regina shared, what is of particular interest is how she described grounding a new initiative in her own values and said in “[her own] language,” which was essential in her transition to the principalship. She went on to share that new initiatives, in her
view, also needed to be grounded in the principal’s authority and that this was essential for helping teachers get on board:

[If teachers hear that] this is a network priority, [then] … they don’t buy into it at all.

Even in [the principal’s] language, I think the way we message things is super important. All those hallway conversations, people will catch you in the hallway and be like, what’s going on? And if you’re not prepared to land that plane really quickly and come out like, ‘Oh, well I was talking to Rebecca in the hallway, and the reason we’re doing this stuff is because the network says that our scores aren’t high enough’... It just comes out really badly. It travels really quickly. And [teachers] know if you’re not invested in it too.

Regina knew that she’s “middle management” when these decisions come down. She described having to:

Finesse it to make it look like it’s been your call… There’ve been many times where I don’t really agree with this, but how do we get teachers to do it... You have to be ready to save it sometimes. Announce it, but also be ready for the questions you’re going to get.

In this quote, Regina articulated how a fully self-authoring principal handles the same issue that Jesse raised. Regina said that even for externally set goals, a principal must describe these in her own language to get investment from faculty. To be successful in her job, Regina told me, she cannot just be the middle person communicating these priorities but instead must be able to articulate why these initiatives are important in her own voice, grounded in her own values.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed my findings from my first research question, regarding how the eight participants in my study, Jesse (score = 3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and David (3), the four who were predominantly socializing knowers, and Regina (4), Rebecca (4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), and
Lauren (4(3), the four who were predominantly self-authoring knowers, described and understood their transition from assistant principal to principal. I found that the transition to the principalship – for these eight participants—involved increasing complexity in their work in three dimensions: an increased breadth of responsibilities, management of interpersonal conflict among a greater number of stakeholders within the school community and the larger district, and clarification and articulation of their own internal values so that they could explain their leadership to others with coherence and navigate through interpersonal conflicts with more confidence.

I also found, related to my third research question, that within each of these three dimensions of complexity, there were important qualitative differences in experience and approach based on each participant’s way of knowing - predicted by whether one had a predominantly socializing or predominantly self-authoring way of knowing. I noticed that participants who make meaning primarily with a socializing way of knowing shared that they have the capacity to identify with and internalize the feelings of others. However, because they cannot reflect on those relationships, I noticed they have a very difficult time disagreeing with those they value and managing conflict. The expectations and judgments of others became how these participants judged themselves, making their transitions to the principalship even more challenging. In contrast, I noticed that participants with a predominately self-authoring way of knowing shared that they are able to reflect on external perspectives and decide for themselves what to do or believe. All of the predominately self-authoring knowers used their internal values as benchmarks for their performance and experienced the challenges of the transition to the principalship differently.
In the next chapter, Chapter VI, I describe my findings from my second research question regarding the professional learning experiences, both formal and informal, that these participants said were most helpful to them or wished they had had during their transition. I also describe how a participant’s way of knowing may affect what they found to be most helpful to them.
Chapter VI

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES TO PREPARE FOR THE PRINCIPALSHIP

In this chapter, I discuss my findings in light of my second research question, which focused on exploring the professional learning experiences that these eight participants described as most helpful to them in preparing for the principalship. I found two types of professional learning experiences that the participants named as most helpful: the first was receiving mentoring (8 of 8), and the second was leading a large, complex project during their time as assistant principal (4 of 8). Additionally, I sought to learn about the learning experiences these participants said they wish they had had to prepare them better for the work of the principalship, and I found that three of the participants said they wished they had the opportunity to lead a large, complex project during their time as assistant principal (3 of 8). I discuss both of these in this chapter and present a summary of these findings in Table 6.1.

As in Chapter V, I also discuss these findings in light of my third research question to explore what relationship exists, if any, between each participant’s way of knowing and the professional learning experiences they named as helpful to them in their transition to the principalship and those they voiced that they wish for. For both types of learning experiences, I found powerful qualitative differences in how participants with different ways of knowing experienced these two types of professional learning. I found that receiving mentoring for David and Jesse, the participants with developmental scores of 3 or 3(4), respectively, were valued because of the affirmation they received from their mentors (2 of 2). In contrast, Carlos, Tamara, Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, the participants with a developmental score of 3/4, 4(3), or 4, said that they valued mentoring primarily as a venue to reflect on and improve their leadership practice (6 of 6). For my second major finding, leading a large complex project from beginning
to end as an assistant principal, I found that only Lauren (score = 4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), Rebecca (4(3)), and Regina (4), the predominantly self-authoring participants, described rich opportunities to take over the leadership of complex projects (4 of 4). At the same time, among the predominantly socializing knowers, David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4) named this type of learning as what they most wished they had prior to becoming principals (3 of 4).

Table 6.1

Summary of Findings in Chapter VI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Professional Learning</th>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers with SOI score of 3 and 3(4) [n=2]</th>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers with a Full Self-Authoring Structure, with SOI scores of 3/4 [n=2] (both structures are operating)</th>
<th>Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers with SOI scores of 4(3), 4 [n=4]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Mentoring                    | ● Mentoring was useful because it provided affirmation that others see the same things that they see and that they’re on the right track (2 of 2)  
  David 3, Jesse 3(4)         | ● Participants appreciated mentors when they were directive and told the mentees what to do and how to act in order to navigate difficult situations (2 of 2)  
  Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4      | ● Mentoring was useful because it helped leaders reflect and learn how to handle difficult and complex situations (4 of 4)  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4 |
|                              | ● Participants could make mistakes and learn from mentors, as long as that mentor was not a direct supervisor (2 of 2)  
  Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4      | ● Participants offered to mentor their assistant principals because they recognized how valuable mentoring was for them when they were assistant principals (4 of 4)  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4 |

| Leading Complex Projects     | ● While participants did not describe receiving opportunities to lead large complex projects, they did describe that they wished they had gotten the opportunity because they felt that it would have made a big difference in preparing them for the principaship (3 of 4)  
  David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4 | ● Participants wished for opportunities to learn how to manage conflict and resistance from staff and the opportunity to have a “guided experience” of being the primary decision-maker (2 of 4)  
  Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4          | ● Opportunities to lead projects gave participants a chance to develop the skills needed to manage complex learning environments (4 of 4)  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4 |
|                              | ● Participants recognized that mentors deliberately pushed them to take on these projects so that they could eventually become successful principals (4 of 4)  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4 | ● These projects gave participants greater confidence that they could do the work of a principal (4 of 4)  
  Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4 |
I discuss my findings in this chapter using an approach that is similar to how I presented in Chapter V. For the first major finding in this chapter, that of professional learning through mentoring, I first introduce the type of professional learning before describing the different experiences of participants in my study according to their predominant way of knowing. For the second major finding, that of professional learning through the leadership of a complex project, I share the experiences of participants who were predominantly self-authoring in their way of knowing and those of the predominantly socializing knowers who wished they had had this learning. I then close this chapter with a summary of my findings about the professional learning experiences participants valued most in their transition to the principalship.

**Mentoring**

I found that eight of eight participants named mentoring as one of the most useful types of professional learning opportunities they received. Mentoring, they explained, was helpful because it helped participants reflect and improve their leadership practice (6 of 8).

Among the eight participants, there were various venues in which this type of professional learning occurred. David, Carlos, Kelly, and Rebecca described how they received mentoring through formal programs related to their transition to new leadership positions (4 of 8). For example, David told me how he received a mentor from his local university through a program that mentored all first-year principals. Similarly, Carlos had a mentor who was a principal in the district assigned to him through his certification program, and this mentor later hired Carlos once he earned his certification. Jesse, Tamara, Carlos, Lauren, Kelly, and Rebecca told me that they received mentoring of some kind from their principals when they were assistant principals (6 of 8). For example, Rebecca, Lauren, and Jesse all received regular, weekly check-ins with their principal mentors. Carlos and Tamara, on the other hand, said they received
mentoring on an ad-hoc basis from their principals. Kelly and Rebecca also described receiving mentoring in less formal ways (2 of 8). For example, Kelly told me that she saw multiple people in her district as mentors, some through informal conversations, and others she saw as role models. Her learning came from how she reflected on her independent observation of them, she explained.

Mentoring for affirmation purposes was, I found, vitally important to David and Jesse, with scores of 3 and 3(4), respectively, who were the participants with a socializing way of knowing and little to no capacity for self-authorship, according to Dr. Popp’s assessment. David and Jesse told me that mentoring for affirmation helped them to see themselves as more ready for the principalship but that these outcomes from mentoring did not help blunt the challenges of addressing the various types of complexity involved in their transition to the principalship.

I found that mentoring was helpful in different ways for the other six participants in my study. Carlos, Tamara, Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, the participants with a developmental score of 3/4, 4(3), or 4 and who had a full self-authoring structure operating independently or in combination with a socializing way of knowing, described mentoring as an opportunity to reflect on and improve their leadership practice (6 of 6) and in turn, helped them be better prepared for the types of complexity inherent in the principalship. I present a summary of the findings in this section in Table 6.2.
Table 6.2

Mentoring According to the Developmental Orientation of Each Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers with SOI score of 3 and 3(4) [n=2]</th>
<th>Predominantly Socializing Knowers with a Full Self-Authoring Structure, with SOI scores of 3/4 [n=2]</th>
<th>Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers with SOI score = 4(3), 4 [n=4]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Mentoring was useful because it provided affirmation that others see the same things that they see and that they’re on the right track (2 of 2) David 3, Jesse 3(4)</td>
<td>● Participants appreciated mentors when they were directive and told the mentees what to do and how to act in order to navigate difficult situations (2 of 2) Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4</td>
<td>● Mentoring was useful because it helped leaders reflect and learn how to handle difficult and complex situations (4 of 4) Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Participants could make mistakes and learn from mentors, as long as that mentor was not a direct supervisor (2 of 2) Carlos 3/4, Tamara 3/4</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Participants offered to mentor their assistant principals because they recognized how valuable mentoring was for them when they were assistant principals (4 of 4) Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the three subsections that follow, I first describe my findings for how David and Jesse, predominantly socializing knowers with SOI scores of 3 and 3(4), described how mentoring was helpful to them as a professional learning experience. I then share the different experiences of Carlos and Tamara, predominantly socializing knowers with a full self-authoring structure operating alongside it (SOI scores of 3/4), before describing how Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, predominantly self-authoring knowers with SOI scores of 4(3) and 4, described the different ways that they found mentoring useful to them in their transition. I close this section on mentoring by describing an additional feature of mentoring as a professional learning experience for self-authoring knowers, as they reflected on what helped them become good leaders and then resolved to provide that same support to the APs with whom they were working.

**Mentoring for Predominantly Socializing Knowers with SOI Score of 3 and 3(4)**

I found that, for David and Jesse, the two participants who were socializing knowers with no or little capacity for self-authorship with scores of 3 and 3(4), respectively, mentoring was an important professional learning experience because of the affirmation they received from their
mentors. This was consistent with what Drago-Severson (2009) found regarding effective mentoring for socializing knowers, that “having a mentor’s approval and acceptance will be of ultimate importance to these mentees” (p. 227). I found that David (score = 3) and Jesse (3(4)) did not speak about receiving mentoring as assistant principals. Still, they did talk about the value of having a mentor in their first years in principals, precisely because of the affirmation those mentors provided, as they explained. In this subsection, I demonstrate these findings by sharing David’s and Jesse’s experiences with mentoring and describing how the primary value was, for them, the affirmation they received.

David and Jesse spoke about the value of having a mentor in their first years as a principal because of the mentor’s affirmation during difficult times. For example, David, a third-year principal of a large urban K-8 school who took over for a principal who had been there for over 30 years, told me that his district partnered with a local university to have mentors for all of the first-year principals in the district, and that relationship was helpful. His mentor was there every week. David valued her because “she was a trusted voice who had an outside lens to review me but also to help me go through ... it’s not just me, right? Like, ‘You see this too?’ That was helpful.” For David, a pure socializing knower at the time of our interviews, what was helpful was not so much another perspective on what might be done, but the affirmation that David is on the right track and that “it’s not just me, right?”.

In a similar way to David, the mentoring Jesse received seemed to be of the greatest value for how it provided the affirmation that he was on the right track. As a reminder, Jesse was at the time of our interviews a second-year principal of a small suburban middle school who sought out a predominately White school district willing to work on racial equity issues. Jesse’s previous supervisor was also his mentor after becoming a principal, and he told me that this
mentoring reassured him that he needed to keep going. What was most helpful to Jesse was the affirmation that said, “I picked you, and you’re on the right track – you have my vote of confidence.” When asked to describe the mentoring that he gets from his superintendent, he shared the following:

I meet with the superintendent here weekly... I share with him what I’m doing and some of the feedback that I’m getting. I tell him my thoughts. I explain my rationale. And he sometimes pushes back with some thoughtful advice. But largely what he says is, ‘I know that’s what you were hired to do. Stay the course.’ That type of support gives me a whole lot of fuel and a whole lot of energy to persist. He heard me say it in the interview and then reminds me weekly, ‘Yes. I know you’re getting some pushback. But yes, I support it. Here are my thoughts. How can I support?’

So, that support and that resource was absolutely essential to me navigating these initial years of making some of the initial changes that I think need to happen quickly... In the meantime, in years one, two, and three, I need the cover of someone who has that buy-in to say, ‘Nope. The kid’s not going anywhere. He’s got my vote.’ That gives me a little bit of cover in these in-between years.

Support for Jesse came in the form of affirmation he was getting from his supervisor and the “fuel” that came from his supervisor’s belief that he could carry out what he was hired to do. For Jesse, just like David, a mentor was primarily helpful to them as a source of affirmation. Had their mentors pushed them or challenged their thinking, as I found self-authoring knowers valued most in mentorship, David and Jesse may have expressed more doubt in their leadership or questioned whether or not they were on the right track.

David’s and Jesse’s experiences are explained by what we know about how socializing knowers experience mentoring. As Drago-Severson (2009) showed, developmental capacity can play a significant role in how adults feel supported and challenged by mentoring relationships. She states that having a mentor’s approval and acceptance will be of ultimate importance for mentees who are socializing knowers. A socializing knower tends to conceive the mentoring relationship as an arena for receiving positive reinforcement and feeling well-held. Mentees will tend to look to their mentors for their beliefs about what should be done and adopt them as their
own, as Jesse described in taking on his mentor’s thoughts about what needed to happen next. Supportively challenging mentees to search inside for their own thinking about a next step or perspective on a situation will help these adults to generate their own values and standards over time and to see themselves as authorities. To support David and Jesse as assistant principals would have likely required taking time to develop the mentor-mentee relationship so that the mentor can gradually ask David and Jesse to turn inward to act with greater independence. My findings here are in alignment with prior research, such that principals who were primarily socializing knowers saw value in mentorship in terms of the affirmation it provided, or as Drago-Severson (2009) states, mentorship “as an arena for receiving positive reinforcement and for feeling well held” (p. 227).

**Mentoring for Predominantly Socializing Knowers with a Full Self-Authoring Structure, with SOI Scores of 3/4**

In this subsection, I describe my findings regarding how Carlos and Tamara, the two participants in my study who were predominantly socializing in their way of knowing but in combination with a full self-authoring structure (score = 3/4), described their professional learning experiences with mentoring. Similar to David and Jesse, Carlos and Tamara said that mentoring was an important professional learning experience because of the affirmation they received from their mentor. However, in contrast to David and Jesse, Carlos and Tamara described their experience with mentoring in a different way. They made sense of it by seeing their practice through their mentor’s eyes and transfer those lessons to improve their leadership practice. More specifically, Carlos and Tamara described mentoring as a venue for learning different ways of leading and processing advice from mentors to improve their leadership. Both Carlos and Tamara explained that they could make mistakes and learn from those mistakes with
the support of mentorship, as long as that mentor was not a direct supervisor, because, as Carlos told me, it was hard for him to be critiqued by his boss and get immediate feedback on his leadership practice.

In this subsection, I focus on Carlos’s experiences in depth because of the richness of his description of his mentoring and what it meant to him, followed by Tamara’s somewhat shorter anecdote about her experiences.

Carlos, the first-year principal of a small urban high school who was drawn to the school because of its focus on serving newly-arrived immigrants, described some of his experiences of being mentored as an assistant principal. For instance, when Carlos was getting certified to be a school administrator, he had an individual mentor, Mr. Bradley (a pseudonym). Mr. Bradley was a full-time principal working in the district. Carlos described Mr. Bradley as “basically in charge of my development until starting in as an intern.” After Carlos’ certification program, Mr. Bradley hired Carlos to work as an admin intern at the school and, subsequently, to serve as an assistant principal.

He described that what his mentor did well was “having me in basically everything school-related.” For example, “in terms of developing the vision or growing programs or human resources or employee relations stuff, I was there the entire time. And I was either watching him and then reflecting with them or doing it and getting feedback from him. So just having that like mentoring relationship was key to the development.”

As mentioned in Chapter IV, Carlos enrolled in an administrative preparation program at the local state university, which was tuition-free in exchange for a commitment to work in the local urban district. There were eight people in the program, including Carlos. They studied different district topics together, from interview skills to hiring. A constant theme in the training
program was getting feedback from mentors, he explained. Carlos felt that this was important and “the biggest piece of something that we don’t get enough in public education.” The feedback he got from his mentor during the internship component was the best part of this training program, in his view. He said that “that experience was better than any type of university training for the admin licensure program. [For example], special ed law, when you take a course like that, it’s really important, it’s good information, but doesn’t necessarily inform how I’m going to interact with staff and students day-to-day.”

Carlos noted: “Teachers will meet as teams [and] teachers will get observed. But how often are we [as school administrators] getting real-time feedback from an experienced mentor? And processing the feedback with a mentor?” As someone who is a predominately socializing knower but also has some elements of self-authorship, Carlos is expressing that wanted some feedback from his mentor and a chance to “process” the feedback with the mentor.

In Chapter V, I discussed that one of the biggest challenges for Carlos was around HR. When I asked him about the supports he got when he was an assistant principal, he recalled that his mentor told him to “never shy away from the conversation. You go head first, and you just do it because it doesn’t get any easier to put it off.” Carlos shared an example of being invited by his mentor to be a part of some of the HR conversations in the school where he was working, “in part just to be the second admin in the room so that everybody was on the same page, but also for learning purposes.” After the conversations, “we’d always reflect afterward about the conversation. He also let me lead some of the conversations if they were people who fell under my supervisory line.”

In our interview, Carlos shared with me a recent time that he was reflecting on and processing his HR issue with a difficult staff member in his role as principal. He shared that
“that’s when that moment kind of comes back and goes, ‘Oh. That’s what he meant.’ Right? So, to face those tough conversations head-on. And what he did well is he modeled how to do it in a very human way, where you’re still taking care of the person, even though they’re kind of in trouble.” In this anecdote, what Carlos valued most was that his mentor was directive and told Carlos what was important in these circumstances. Carlos told me his mentor said to him that “based on my years of experience, in these situations, this is what we should do, and this is what we can’t afford. We can’t afford to not take this action.”

The way Carlos described his experience of the mentoring he received is revealing. He valued how his mentor was directive in telling him what to do, and his processing of this modeling was seen in how he later transferred these directives to his own practice, wholesale. As a knower who was predominantly socializing in his way of knowing in combination with a full self-authoring structure (score = 3/4), Carlos’s description illuminates that he saw this work through his mentor’s eyes and improved his leadership practice from his learning experiences in mentorship.

Additionally, it was important for Carlos that the person giving the feedback was not “his boss” because “I have to agree with almost anything the principal says because they’re the boss.” It’s helpful because it “doesn’t have that kind of pressure.” As a predominantly socializing knower, it would have been difficult for him to get feedback from a direct supervisor who challenges or corrects his action because these knowers primarily see and assess themselves as important others, such as supervisors, view them (Drago-Severson, 2009).

Unlike Carlos, for whom professional learning from mentorship was an ongoing part of his preparation for the principalship, Tamara (score = 3/4) described only a single instance when she was mentored by her principal when she was an assistant principal. Tamara, a third-year
founding principal of a new small urban high school in the Midwest who spent over 12 years as an assistant principal in another district, recalled an experience during her time as an AP where her principal asked her to lead an open house after the school made the difficult decision to terminate a teacher. As a result, it was Tamara’s job, she said, to share with the parents that there were no viable replacements for that teacher and many changes for the students who were with that teacher. The presentation involved lots of questions directed at Tamara. Tamara told me:

So, I remember that [my principal] very intentionally made me own [the meeting]. Like, I had to meet with the parents, I had to write the memos, I had to explain what was happening. I was the point person, but she was there the whole time. She stood in the back of the room when [I was] meeting with parents, so if it got too out of control or whatever, she would have absolutely stepped in. She proofed the memos [I wrote]. She was there the whole time but still made me own that and go through dealing with the boards and angry parents and all of those things.

This experience was something that helped Tamara understand what it was like to “stand in the shoes” of the principal but with the expectation that her principal would be right there, ready to step in if something went “out of control.” In Chapter 5, I shared that managing conflicts and having difficult conversations with other adults can be one of the most challenging aspects of the transition to the principalship. When I asked Tamara to elaborate more about the value of experience, she said: “I needed that. I needed to toughen my skin. I needed to understand how to navigate those dynamics, both in a large group setting and in smaller conversations.” What was clear to her was that she learned that she was not going to make everybody happy.

While it was a valuable experience for her, she explained that she was not sure if her principal did it deliberately, saying, “I have no idea if that was an intentional move on her part or not, but that is a way that I felt supported by her, but still was being held to the standard of having to take responsibility for it.” Interviewing Tamara’s principal to determine their intent in their actions was beyond my study's scope, which focused on how these new principals described and understood their professional learning as part of their transition. But in the small anecdote
that Tamara, a 3/4 knower like Carlos, shared, I noted how she was able to garner more from this learning experience beyond simple affirmation to, as she said, “toughen her skin” and learn to “navigate” difficult situations as a principal must learn to do.

In summary, in this subsection regarding how predominantly socializing knowers found value in mentoring, I discussed two main types of experiences. Jesse (score = 3(4)) and David (score = 3), who were both socializing knowers with little to no capacity for self-authorship, valued mentoring only for the affirmation it provided them. In contrast, Tamara and Carlos, who both had a full structure of self-authorship but a dominant socializing way of knowing as 3/4 knowers, were able to benefit from “a context for conversations that explore how to balance the multiple demands of work” and discover “creative strategies for managing the complex demands of leading” in ways that Jesse (score = 3(4)) and David (3) did not describe (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 228). In the next section, I show how the participants who made meaning with a predominantly self-authoring way of knowing described their mentoring experiences in distinct ways from David, Jesse, Carlos, or Tamara.

**Mentoring for Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers**

I found that Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, the four participants who were predominantly self-authoring knowers, named as most helpful the mentoring that stretched them and put them in uncomfortable positions and then supported them to stretch in this way. This is in stark contrast to the predominantly socializing knowers who primarily valued mentorship for affirmation. As I mentioned in Chapter V, the transition to the principalship meant that each principal had to confront and deal with significant levels of complexity in the role, stretching what assistant principals said they were comfortable doing and taking on increasingly complex roles as principals. In this section, I offer powerful anecdotes from Kelly (score = 4(3)) and
Regina (4) to support these findings and to further articulate how participants with incremental differences in their ways of knowing experienced mentoring as a valuable professional learning experience. I selected Kelly and Regina’s stories because they are rich, emblematic stories and because they help highlight the small but important incremental differences in development (based on their SOI scores) in why the mentoring was valuable to them.

Kelly, a predominately self-authoring knower with a score of 4(3) and a third-year principal of a mid-sized suburban middle school in a mostly affluent neighborhood at the time of our interview, described how she valued the affirmation from mentors while simultaneously critiquing her need for affirmation, which she described as a flaw she was actively working on. As a reminder, Kelly (score 4(3)) was two incremental positions further along the developmental continuum as compared with Carlos (score = 3/4). For Kelly, a socializing knower, what mattered the most to her was the affirmation from mentors, even while her dominant self-authoring way of knowing takes a perspective on her dependence on others’ affirmation and holds it as an object to critique and change.

This dynamic where Kelly is moving away from a socializing way of knowing was also evident in how Kelly described her greatest area of strength as her ability to connect with people alongside the awareness that “when people doubt me, I doubt myself.” Kelly said, “Everyone’s got stuff, and I work on it. I think that’s been an area of growth for me the past three years.” In Kelly’s case, she recognized that she worked:

… in a district that knows me well, and [where] I’ve grown up as an administrator. I’ve had conversations where it was brought to my attention, or through conversations, I realized that I need affirmation from other people. That’s something I really thrive on. And that was something that I was able to talk to one of my superintendents, who has retired five years ago. And so those conversations were helpful.

Thus, when Kelly talked about the value of her mentor, she said that her mentoring relationship “gave me a channel when I was upset and my confidence was hit, I could speak with her, and her
belief in me. I think that was quite helpful in knowing that I had someone I think was an incredible leader believe that I could do it.” Kelly told me how she needed affirmation and that she “thrives on” it. Here, Kelly showed greater awareness of her need for validation and how her mentor provided that kind of support.

Kelly also described observing role models as a kind of mentoring for her. She watched others lead and took notes, and told me that she transferred these new practices to her own leadership, with confidence that “if they can do it, I can do it too.” Kelly stated that “watching good administrators and how they handle things is really important to me as well.” For example, Kelly shared that she grew up [professionally] in this school district with the current superintendent - she started as a teacher in the district and became an assistant principal and principal in the same district. It was valuable to “watch [the superintendent] do some things really well, and I think that helped me in some difficult situations. That’s the stuff that I take in, and that’s where I learn. Just to be able to watch people who do their job well and kind of take note of the ways that I could utilize those skills in my work.” In this kind of relationship—i.e., with her superintendent, Kelly did not receive direct mentorship, nor did anyone guide her actions. Instead, Kelly observed and watched her role models and learned vicariously through them.

Kelly’s capacity to decide, for herself, which observed leadership practices she wanted to use in her own practice reflected how her self-authoring way of knowing was dominant. It is interesting to contrast this to Carlos (score = 3/4), who, as a predominantly socializing knower with a full self-authoring structure, saw some of the same value but needed to discuss it in the context of his mentoring relationship to transfer it to his own practice. Whereas Kelly (score = 4(3)), with a dominant self-authoring structure, described how she could decide to improve her
practice independently through observation of role models and reflection about what she had seen.

To understand how a fully self-authoring knower made sense of the mentoring opportunities, I discuss Regina’s experience (score = 4), the only purely self-authoring knower in the study with no vestiges of a socializing structure in evidence. As a reminder, Regina was a third-year principal of a small urban elementary charter school who held multiple roles in the same school before becoming principal. When she was an academic director (equivalent to an assistant principal at her charter school), she said she had a “really good relationship” with her principal. She got daily check-ins with the principal that were extended. During these check-ins, Regina got to talk through and practice evaluation. She said that “when things are high stakes, we want to practice it.” She had practiced “giving feedback, thinking through the school system, talking through a really difficult conversation, all things that are hard to do somethings in a busy school day.” In contrast to Carlos, who as a predominately socializing knower (score = 3/4) said he was not able to do so, Regina felt she could be completely vulnerable with her principal:

[I felt] like I can tell my principal everything, like, ‘I’m feeling really scared for [this teacher],’ or, ‘I really don’t know what to say to make sure that we land this plane and we minimize disruptions of student learning.’ I also think just being able to be really vulnerable with that leader was really helpful.

In this quote, I noted how Regina, as a fully self-authoring knower, saw vulnerability with her supervisor as “really helpful,” a description of the experience that was unique among participants in my study and which stood in contrast to the participants who were predominantly socializing knowers. However, it is not as if self-authoring knowers are fearless with their supervisors: Regina shared how she initially did not feel comfortable with sharing mistakes with her direct supervisor: “Initially, I didn’t feel like I could open up to her about everything because she was
the head supervisor.” Regina told me that over the first few years of her principalship, she recognized that she needed to build that trust to develop herself as a leader:

Things didn’t always go the way I wanted them to, even though I was like, ‘Here’s my plan for this. This is what I’m thinking,’ but I was able to say that to her. I think if I just been like, ‘Wow. What’s this person going to say to me? Are they going to trust me if I make a mistake? Are they going to have my back still if I don’t get good results?’

Regina got to the point, she told me, where she could get mentoring from her supervisor: “I do think I was able to get better because she worked with me on that as well.” Regina recognized that she didn’t need to feel threatened by the feedback but that she could learn from the critical feedback from her principal in order to get better.

**Mentoring participants offered to their assistant principals.** Regina, Rebecca, Lauren, and Kelly independently discussed their own work mentoring their own assistant principals. While this was not directly related to my third research question, they all reflected during the member check at the start of our second interview about how they were mentoring their own APs. As I described in depth in Chapter III, I first conducted an initial analysis of my first two research questions before reading the developmental assessments of the participants. Once I unsealed SOI data as a subsequent step in my analysis, the connecting through-line was the capacity of self-authoring knowers to reflect on what helped them become good leaders and then critiqued themselves to consider how they might provide that same support to the APs that they were working with.

For Regina (score = 4), this came during the second interview when I asked her if she had any reflections after the first interview:

I just was grateful to have had that support throughout that time of being an academic director. It made me think a lot about the supports currently happening for the academic director who works with me. It made me think a little more about how I could be a little bit more to help her, just getting to know her personality and what she wants to get out of this job and her goals. So, I think it did make me think a lot more about what I could be
doing right now to set her up for an easier transition when she does go for a principal role.

As a fully self-authoring knower, Regina reflected how she was supported in her transition and then considered her role in supporting those working with her. Regina said it was important to get to know her AP’s personality and “what she wants to get out of this job and her goals.” This kind of approach was reflective of Regina’s understanding of mentoring can be done well by a supervisor. This is because Regina could reflect on how she, as an assistant principal, grew under the mentorship from her principal. As a self-authoring knower, Regina could articulate that her personal values were important to her leadership and wanted to translate that same kind of values-based leadership to her assistant principal.

Rebecca (score = 4(3)), a second-year principal of a large urban high school who had worked for six years as assistant principal at that same school, also had a similar reflection to Regina, also occurring at the beginning of the second interview. She, too, was reflective about how what she could be doing to mentor her APs:

It’s interesting because now that I’ve been in the principal role for about a year, the last conversation I had with my new principal coach was developing the capacity of assistant principals and how I drew that and what that should look like… A part of that was because I had been reflecting; I thought back to my tenure portfolio and how it really was this moment of pulling together some of my best learning and work. I [realized], ‘Oh, I was able to do that because of the experience that I had as an AP and because I was able to take on significant responsibilities that involve adult learning and to struggle but also be supported.’ I want to give that kind of experience to my AP colleagues. It’s my responsibility in the principal role to actively create that environment for them, the holding environment for them. I think it just took me getting through the first year to be able to step back and think in that way, but more than any one moment, it’s like having experienced that sort of holding environment space myself has made me think, ‘How do I do that for the APs who I’m part of a team with?’

In the above passage, Rebecca connected the desire to mentor the APs at her school to her own experiences of being mentored as an AP and realized how valuable the mentoring was for her when she was an AP. She recognized that “it’s my responsibility in the principal role to actively
create that environment for them.” As a self-authoring knower, she took perspective on her experiences and then thought about the larger system and how she could, in turn, shape the system to support others.

I will share more in the next chapter, but I believe that predominantly self-authoring principals can provide powerful mentoring to others with just a prompt to reflect, but socializing knowers principals may need additional training or support to do it. For example, Jesse shared that as he mentors his AP, his critique will need to be delicate because he knows how hard it was for him to take critical feedback.

Next, I describe my second major finding in this chapter.

**Opportunities to Lead Complex Projects as Assistant Principals**

My second major finding regarding the professional learning experiences participants named as helpful or wished they had experienced leading a large complex project during their time as assistant principals. Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina – all four predominantly self-authoring principals with scores of 4(3) or 4 – felt that this was the most valuable learning experience they had as an assistant principal (4 of 8). These kinds of learning experiences involved taking ownership of a complex project from beginning to end and represented the closest approximation to the principalship they had experienced during their time as APs. Of the other four participants, only Tamara, who has a predominantly socializing way of knowing with a fully operating self-authoring way of knowing (score = 3/4), described a similar experience but on a much smaller scale. The other predominantly socializing participants, David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), and Carlos (3/4) described nothing similar but articulated that they wished they had gotten the opportunity to lead significant projects because they believed it would have been valuable to them once they became principals (3 of 4). This could be because these three
participants did not have a dominant self-authoring way of knowing. Table 6.3 contains a summary of my findings in this section.

Table 6.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities to Lead Complex Projects According to the Development of Each Participant</th>
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<tr>
<td>Predominantly Socializing Knowers</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SOI score = 3, 3(4), and 3/4</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- While participants did not describe receiving opportunities to lead large complex projects, they did describe that they wished they had gotten the opportunity because they felt that it would have made a big difference in preparing them for the principalship (3 of 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>David 3, Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Participants wished for opportunities to learn how to manage conflict and resistance from staff and the opportunity to have a “guided experience” of being the primary decision-maker (2 of 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jesse 3(4), Carlos 3/4</td>
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<tr>
<td>- These projects gave participants a chance to develop the skills needed to manage complex learning environments (4 of 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lauren 4(3), Kelly 4(3), Rebecca 4(3), Regina 4</td>
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In this section, I first describe the rich experiences of the four predominantly self-authoring knowers, drawing on stories from Regina, Rebecca, Kelly, and especially Lauren, whose description of her experience most avidly captured the value of this kind of learning. I then describe how Jesse (score =3(4)), and David (score=3), both predominantly socializing knowers, talked about how they had wished for the opportunity to lead complex projects during their time as assistant principals. I anchor this section with a rich anecdote from Jesse, who, in contrast to the self-authoring knowers’ experiences, was asked to leave the room when the work got difficult. I close with Jesse’s exhortation to APs who are looking ahead to a transition to the principalship to seek out the kind of experience that the predominantly self-authoring principals all reported they got.
Predominantly Self-Authoring Knowers and Leadership of Complex Projects

I found that all four predominantly self-authoring participants, Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, with scores of 4(3) and 4, named taking ownership of a complex project as their most helpful learning experiences in managing the transition to the principalship. In this section, I describe this type of learning experience in more depth before articulating how the leadership of these complex projects proceeded for each participant.

These complex projects took different forms for each participant. For Lauren, it was designing a master schedule for the high school. For Regina, it was being the testing coordinator for all of the state tests. For Kelly, it was presenting at the school board meeting. And for Rebecca, it was planning and facilitating the weekly cabinet meetings. These kinds of learning experiences, they said, gave them a greater sense of confidence that they could do the work of a principalship. I found that these kinds of learning experiences, for all of these participants, occurred closer to the transition to the principalship after they were deemed sufficiently prepared to take on the challenge in preparation for building-level leadership. Lauren (score = 4(3)), the first-year principal of a mid-sized suburban high school in a mostly affluent neighborhood who had worked as an assistant principal in three different school districts, said it best when I asked her what kinds of learning experiences helped her get ready to become a principal. She replied that she’s been asked that question before and was emphatic about her thinking, “I think the single most important thing was having autonomy over my own projects.” Lauren was incredibly articulate about the power of this type of professional learning experience, and her descriptions anchor my findings in this section. Below I start with the experiences of Regina, Rebecca, and Kelly before moving on to Lauren.
Regina (score = 4), a third-year principal of a small urban elementary charter school who held multiple roles in the same school before becoming principal, had several examples of how she could take on a leadership role and be in charge of projects. One was when she was the testing coordinator for state exams at her schools. She told me:

I know this will sound really cheesy, but I became the testing coordinator for my school, and my principal was like, ‘You got this. It’s all yours.’ I thought, ‘Oh, God,’ but I learned so much. And it went really well; students came on time, everyone worked really hard. I remember that was also a positive experience that definitely helped me as a principal.

This experience helped Regina work with students, parents, and the larger state testing bureaucracy and gave her not only first-hand experience working on testing but provided her the confidence that she could lead something of this scale.

Rebecca (score = 4(3)), a second-year principal of a large urban high school who had worked for six years as assistant principal at that same school, also shared an example of when she was able to take on a significant leadership project and how that learning transferred to the principalship. Rebecca was able to point to many different opportunities for leadership, but the one she spent the most extended amount of time talking about was regarding the coordinating and facilitating of the weekly cabinet meetings. Rebecca shared:

The way that I decided to approach that was to have the group generate ideas for school-wide issues affecting the whole school that we wanted to work on together. Then I used descriptive inquiry processes to work with the group to generate an understanding of the issue, to descriptively generate a collective understanding of the issue, to gather thinking for what we might want to keep, and what we might want to adjust, and how we might adjust to refine the plans that we were coming up with collaboratively, to bring the plans to our colleagues for feedback and input, to bring the plans to students for feedback and input to then try the new thing that we had worked on and reflect on how it went.

I remember a moment in my first year where I asked [my mentor] to go through a cabinet with me, and she said to me, ‘You know how to do this. You know how to facilitate inquiry around these topics. If you take a descriptive stance with this group, you’ll be fine.’ I just cannot even say how valuable it was that I entered the role with enough mastery in that area.
Facilitating the cabinet meetings was a responsibility that her principal usually took on, so being able to have this responsibility as an assistant principal was valuable. The fact that she used the term “mastery” was meaningful because, as I discussed in Chapter V, the participants in the study had described that new relationships with staff could be a big and complex challenge.

Rebecca also said earlier that conflict was a natural part of the dialogue that can inform decision-making. She was able to have an internal focus on her own value-generation system when making these decisions. Rebecca’s orientation toward conflict and the internal generation of her own values were all consistent with someone predominantly self-authoring (Kegan 1982, 1994; Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2016).

As Rebecca reflected, she said that “in hindsight, I think I was deliberately pushed to be involved in those things so that I had enough practice in doing them that I could handle it.” Her mentor and supervisor provided time to explore different proposals before moving forward and allowed her to embrace the values of others that were in opposition to her own – all critical skillsets for a new principal.

An example from Kelly similar to those shared by Regina and Rebecca arose when I asked her for one specific incident that shifted her thinking and prepared her for the principalship. Kelly (score = 4(3)), a third-year principal of a mid-sized suburban middle school in a mostly affluent neighborhood who had worked in the same school as an assistant principal, quickly jumped in and said that she had to present at a major district board meeting. She described preparing and representing the school to the board members and the public. She stepped into the principal's shoes because the principal could not attend and said that, afterward, this experience was a “significant confidence builder” for her to transition to the principalship. It was important for her, she explained, that she could overcome her nerves and that it went well.
As I shared in the opening of this section, out of all of the participants who discussed this, Lauren had the most precise and most detailed description of what it meant to take ownership of a significant project and how this impacted her feeling of readiness to become a principal. As a reminder, Lauren was at the time of our interviews the first-year principal of a mid-sized suburban high school in a largely affluent neighborhood who had worked as an assistant principal in three different school districts.

When asked the same question regarding one specific incident that shifted her thinking, Lauren replied that this was something people had asked her before. She said that “I think the single most important thing was having autonomy over my own projects.” She described leading the “master schedule change process” that took a full three years. Lauren shared,

It started with me working with a scheduling consultant, just to explore the possibilities, and building a scheduling committee made up of teachers and staff members from every department in the school, then bringing kids and parents into that mix to create a standing scheduling committee, then going out with those teams of people into various schools around the tri-state area to look at other schedules and actions and bringing all that information back, holding focus groups within the school, and ultimately coming up with three scheduling proposals to get feedback on from the community, and then once we made a decision actually implementing it.

Not only did the process involve many different stakeholders, but it also forced her to manage the often-times competing wishes and desires in her community. She was the one that had to facilitate the dialogue between the different groups, and then once a decision was made, she had also to implement the new master schedule. In Chapter V, I discussed how one of the challenges for participants was managing the increased breadth of responsibilities as well as managing the different adult relationships. Lauren’s three-year master schedule provided her much-needed practice in developing those skills.

Dr. Nancy Popp, the expert developmental psychologist that conducted the Subject-Object Interview, evaluated Lauren’s way of knowing as 4(3) but said that she “demonstrated a
fully Self-authoring way of knowing, with a few minor remnants of the Socializing way of knowing, almost not enough to score.” From Lauren’s description, I could tell that she was not threatened by working with different constituencies, but instead, she was able to use other people’s ideas to help their own understanding of the project. This was consistent with what Drago-Severson (2009) found regarding self-authoring knowers and leadership roles. Lauren has the capacity to listen to new ideas and diverse points of view without putting her own opinions at risk.

In Lauren’s experience, working on the master schedule revision also gave her the opportunity to learn about so many different technical aspects of school leadership:

There was a lot about contracts that I learned, teacher contracts, teacher aide contracts. There were financial considerations that I learned along the way, staffing capacity, efficiency, and that kind of stuff. There was a lot about building use that I learned. I learned about the lunch program and lunch capacity, and what could and could not be done, how many kids could and could not be served based on our physical structure. Through that process, you’re also forced to learn a lot about contact time, science lab minutes, that kind of stuff. I also learned a lot about professional development to go along with block scheduling, project-based learning, even interdisciplinary course structures.

She came out of this process a firm believer that “the experience of project management, developing, and leading groups of teachers was probably the most valuable training for the principalship.” She could get this experience because one of her previous school's principal was “very purposeful about giving APs autonomy” over their own projects. The master schedule revision process, even though “it’s hard and time-consuming, is probably the single most important thing that you learn how to do as an AP because it drives the whole school.”

Lauren had the experience of working as an assistant principal in three different school districts. And as such, she could compare across the three other schools, and she noted that the building principal and the leadership culture in the building could be a barrier to this kind of important learning for APs. She had fond memories of one particular principal, the one that gave
her the responsibility of leading the master schedule change process. From this principal, she “learned from him how important [it is to] trust the people that you work with and give them the freedom to really manage projects and let them lead the project management.” Whereas, in another school, Lauren told me:

The principal there was more of an authoritarian. Great guy, but he was the face of everything, the be-all, and end-all of everything. What that means as an AP in that culture is that people come to you for menial things, and you work on minor student discipline and stuff like that. But then, whenever there’s anything outside of that realm, it goes to the next level automatically. The impact that has on the culture of the building is very different.

This principal was the third principal she worked with, and her experience with this principal was part of the reason she left that school and prompted her to seek the principalship in another district. Lauren’s experiences highlight that the opportunity to lead complex projects as an AP is highly dependent on the school culture and the building principal’s approach.

Experiences of Predominantly Socializing Knowers

Among predominantly socializing knowers, I found that only one participant named something similar to this kind of professional learning described by others in the section above (1 of 4). This was the example I described in the previous section on mentoring, that of Tamara (score = 3/4) being asked to lead the follow-up with the school community once the school decided to terminate a teacher mid-year. Tamara had to face angry parents and write memos to the community. Tamara told me that she saw value in that experience, but she did not describe it as a significant complex project that required making leadership decisions over time and working with multiple stakeholders. It is important to note that Tamara (score = 3/4) has both a socializing and a self-authoring way of knowing present but operates predominately with the socializing way of knowing.
I noted earlier that Jesse (score = 3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and David (3) wished for experiences like that of Regina (4), Rebecca (4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), and Lauren (4(3)). Jesse, in particular, was emphatic in describing how this would have been helpful to him. Why did all participants who were predominantly self-authoring knowers get this valuable learning experience that those who were predominantly socializing knowers largely did not? While, as in one of Lauren’s schools, availability can be affected by the AP’s current principal and school culture, it is possible that the mentors of primarily socializing knowers may have tried to offer them the chance to take over ownership of complex projects, but upon seeing the reactions from these assistant principals, the mentors may have realized that providing them this leadership role may have been too far a stretch. For example, as I described earlier in this section, Carlos, a predominantly socializing knower with a full self-authoring structure, found it hard to receive critical feedback from his supervisor, a hallmark of his socializing way of knowing at the time of our interviews (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2016; Kegan, 1982, 1994). I cannot definitively say, had these socializing knowers had the same supervisors as the self-authoring knowers in my study, whether they would have been offered similar opportunities, but I theorize that the kind of project that, for example, Lauren took on to develop and then present in front of the entire school board might have just been overwhelming for an assistant principal with a predominantly socializing way of knowing.

However, this kind of learning was what I found predominantly socializing participants most wished they had been given to support their transition. My second research question asked what was helpful to the participants as they undergo the transition from assistant to principal and what they wished they had gotten during this transition. A key finding to this question is that the
predominantly socializing participants named that they wished they had the opportunity to lead complex projects.

David, a third-year principal of a large urban K-8 school who took over for a principal who had been there for over 30 years, shared that he had been a testing coordinator before becoming an AP and that that experience was useful in giving him a taste of school leadership. In describing whether he was prepared for the principalship, David, who was a pure socializing knower (score = 3), said that “there’s the hard stuff that you could read about in textbooks, you can interview somebody about, you could even be there for, but I think as a principal you just experience it a whole different way.” In David’s eyes, even if he had experience with the same issue while working as an assistant principal, it would be very different from when he experienced it as a principal. As I described in Chapter V, David believed that the principal “holds the weight of the bag” and that ultimate responsibility is one of the biggest adjustments that he had to make. David spoke in vague terms of what would’ve been helpful to him, stating that the “most beneficial has been experiential items,” meaning that while talking about leadership issues made sense to him, he learned from experiencing the work. He shared that:

[In] grad school getting my degree for educational administration, I did a lot in theory and sort of in a vacuum. So, I created a master schedule. I developed a pay scale for every unionized employee and a fictional district. I observed teachers and provided a formal write-up and things, but it was all very much without context.

In contrast to the graduate school program, he believed that if you can “prepare an AP to use some of those experiences, even within their own personal context,” that can be helpful as well. However, David did not say too much more about the benefit of these professional experiences as learning experiences. In Chapter V, I mentioned that David saw his leadership roles as practice “giving teachers work that they did not want to do, so establishing rapport with teachers… has been helpful in that practice.” For David, taking on those leadership roles as an
assistant principal provided value only, he told me, as a mechanism to build more relationships with the teachers he led.

The most powerful insight from a predominately socializing knower about this kind of learning experience came from Jesse (score = 3(4)). Jesse, a second-year principal of a small suburban middle school who sought out a predominately White school district willing to work on issues of racial equity, shared with me a counter-example of sorts. He wanted to get this kind of experience but was not given the opportunity to own the work and therefore could not develop and prepare as well as he would have liked for the principalship. As a reminder, in Chapter V, I described how Jesse struggled with difficult HR conversations with his staff in his work as a principal. As an assistant principal, he “did not touch HR matters.” He remembered one evaluation conversation where a teacher disagreed with a rating he gave, and “the first thing that happened was the principal took over the subsequent conversations.” In fact, there were HR conversations where Jesse remembered “specifically being asked to leave the room because they were between a principal and a teacher. Not necessarily debriefed upon either. That situation just kind of went away. And, if I’m being very reflective, I didn’t evaluate that teacher next year.” He said that he ultimately did not know how that situation got handled and couldn’t learn from it.

Jesse said that:

He [the direct supervisor] took the burden off my plate. But we did not circle back to it in a learning capacity of, ‘Here’s what happens here. Here are some things that you could’ve maybe improved upon or not. Here’s how this is going to go away or reach a resolution.’

Interestingly, Jesse later said that “maybe part of the reason for that though is, I was not, at that stage of my career, I was not explicit about my intention to be a principal someday.” We hear Jesse’s thinking that perhaps if he were more explicit about his intention, the principal would have acted differently. Jesse told me about how he needed to become better skilled at having
difficult HR conversations and knew that he would have benefitted from more experience. Without interviewing Jesse’s former principal, we cannot know why Jesse was not given the opportunity to lead these kinds of conversations.

We spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the experiences that Jesse got as an assistant principal, and he said that “as I’m thinking through, I never really had the explicit and supervised opportunity to roll out such a change.” He never had an opportunity to take the lead on a particular initiative. Instead, he felt like towards the later years of his assistant principalship, and he was merely “executing what the principal believed.” Jesse felt that for some of the key responsibilities, it’s appropriate for the principal “to be in charge like that” and for him as the assistant principal to say, “this is what the principal says.” This is in line with Jesse’s way of knowing as a predominately socializing knower.

One of the parts of my interview protocol asked participants what supports they wished they would have gotten to make them prepared for the principalship. Jesse’s main suggestion was as follows:

I think that if an assistant principal desires to be a principal, there could be value in them taking on projects under the supervision of their principal to lead the school through some type of initiative and be the one in charge of thinking through how you advertise it, how you get feedback on it, how you implement it, and how you see it through, like an internship within your own position, where it’s very intentional that this will be a bumpy road. [It] would be good for principals if assistant principals were acting as mini-principals. It could be a safe place where an assistant principal could, again, do a ‘within my own job internship’ to lead that initiative and get a taste of what it’s like to have people push back. And hearing the resistance before you’re the final line principal could be really beneficial.

Jesse identifies that getting a taste of “what it’s like to have people push back” is crucial in order to be better prepared for the principalship. This is consistent with someone who is predominately socializing and learning how to appreciate the resistance principals will get from the rest of the staff.
As part of his training and occasional district assistant principal workshops, Jesse got some exposure to things like scheduling and budgeting. Jesse said, “I was given a two-hour training on a budget, but then there was nothing at my school building where I had entrée to that process. So, I was given an invitation to superficial training, but then not necessarily practice.” Jesse “loved the monthly training sessions” but wanted those to be paired with a “district-level initiative for principals then to give the space for real-world practice under their supervision.” Jesse spoke with conviction that if he had gotten additional practice, he would’ve been better prepared. To Jesse, once you become principal, you’re out there making decisions that are “high risk” and “high stakes.” Jesse told me that “It would’ve been nice to have some guided experience in that area before the weight of the full role was on my shoulders.”

For Jesse, it’s the principal’s job to be “the decider,” and he wasn’t given enough practice and enough experience in those shoes. Jesse shared that “I would have been more effective on day one if there’d been a bit more intentional exposure to some of the scenarios and the feeling of the pressure of being the decider.” In his opinion, principals should be “a bit more intentional” and say directly to the assistant principals working under them: “Hey, you think you want to do this job someday, sit with me for the day and see some of these HR conversations, budget conversations, scheduling conversations. See how hard it is for me to get into classrooms unless I’m intentional about it.” He did not get that conversation and realized in retrospect how useful it would have been had his principal pulled him aside to have those kinds of conversations.

When I presented Jesse with the opportunity to say what he would tell aspiring principals, Jesse was emphatic in saying that those in transition, or those who want the principalship, get the experience of leading from the front and taking a complex project through to completion. Jesse shared:
If you’re preparing for this role, you’re preparing to be out in front. You need to find opportunities and initiatives or spaces where you’re in that place, and you’re answering those questions because you need to be ready to do that. You’re the one answering the call or defending the decision in a year. So, find opportunities. Again, your principal would need to know what you’re doing, but find opportunities to do so and be prepared to practice being comfortable in that discomfort. So, kind of expanding on that previous idea, you can’t just sit back and be another year of a good assistant principal. If you want to do this, you’ve got to get out there and practice it.

This stood out to me as one of the most powerful statements in all of my interviews across all of my participants: Jesse was clear about what he struggled with as a principal because he did not get this kind of opportunity. He was making a clear case for how APs should approach their final years in the role. I would argue that Jesse was also making a strong recommendation for principal mentors and district leadership programs about how they could support aspiring principals. I discuss this implication more in Chapter VII.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented my findings in light of my second and third research questions, exploring the professional learning experiences that these eight participants found most helpful in preparation for their transition from assistant principal to principal. I found that there were two types of professional learning that they named, that of receiving mentoring from others (8 of 8) and having the opportunity to lead a large, complex project from beginning to end (4 of 8; all four predominantly self-authoring knowers). In addition, most of the predominantly socializing knowers (3 of 4) named that they wished they had the opportunity to lead large, complex projects when they were assistant principals. For each type of professional learning, I found that the participant’s way of knowing was a powerful influencer of it and how they accessed the professional learning available through each type of experience.
In my next chapter, Chapter VII, I summarize the findings presented in Chapter V and this chapter, Chapter VI, before acknowledging my study's limitations and exploring the implications of my study for educational leadership practice, development, and research.
Chapter VII
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I bring my study to a close by summarizing all that I learned from David, Jesse, Carlos, Tamara, Kelly, Lauren, Rebecca, and Regina, the eight participants in this study who had recently transitioned from the role of assistant principal to principal. I also share the implications of my findings for school leadership practice and research. As a reminder, the purpose of this study was to better understand how these eight participants described, understood, and experienced their transition from assistant principal to principal, what they named as the professional learning experiences they have experienced, and how, if at all, their learning supported them in this transition. Additionally, given the essential nature of developmental psychology in understanding the challenges and the work of principals (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018), my study used a purposeful developmental sample to explore how, if at all, participants’ way of knowing, as assessed by an expert developmental psychologist, might help explain how they made meaning of their experiences in transitioning to the principalship and their learning experiences along the way.

First, I share a summary of the findings from Chapters V and VI that I drew from the data analyses to answer my three research questions. Those research questions are:

1. How do eight principals with three or fewer years of experience in the role, four of whom are predominantly socializing in their way of knowing and four of whom are predominantly self-authoring in their way of knowing, describe and understand their transition from assistant principal to principal?
2. What professional learning experiences do these participants describe as most helpful in preparing them for the principalship, and which learning experiences do they wish they had to better prepare them for the principalship?

3. What are the relationships, if any, between the participants’ different ways of making meaning as adult learners and their experiences as assistant principals? Are there patterns in the ways that assistant principals with similar and different developmental positions make sense of their professional learning experiences and this transition to becoming a new principal?

Following a summary of the findings, I address the limitations of the study and then consider the implications of my findings for aspiring principals and principal mentors, and school districts. I then make recommendations for further research and close with a summary and reflection.

**Summary of Findings**

In this section, I present a summary of what I learned in answering the three research questions that sat at the heart of my study. I first summarize what I learned from the participants about their experiences and professional learning in the transition from assistant principal to principal. I then describe the ways I found that their experiences in the transition to the principalship were influenced by the participant’s way of knowing.

In answering my first research question in Chapter V, I learned from the participants that their transition to the principalship involved increasing complexity in their work in *three* dimensions: an *increased breadth of responsibilities* (8 of 8), including budgeting, scheduling, supervision of all staff, and, in some cases, district politics (4 of 8); more *complex interpersonal conflict* among a higher number of stakeholders as they transitioned to assume a new mantle of authority as principal (8 of 8); and looking inward to *clarify their internal values*, which they
said helped manage the breadth and depth of the first two dimensions of complexity (8 of 8). In answering my second research question in Chapter VI, I found two types of professional learning experiences that participants named as most helpful during their transition. The first was receiving mentoring (8 of 8), and the second was leading a large, complex project during their time as assistant principal (4 of 8). An additional three participants said that they had wished most for the opportunity to lead a large, complex project like those described by the other participants (3 of 8).

In answering my third research question, I explored what relationship existed, if any, between each participant’s way of knowing and their experiences and professional learning in transitioning to the principalship. I wove the findings to the third research question throughout Chapters V and VI as they were deeply connected to the first two research questions.

As a reminder, throughout my dissertation, I use the term *predominantly socializing knowers* to refer to the first group of participants in my purposeful sample, for whom the socializing way of knowing was evaluated to be dominant, corresponding to Subject-Object Interview (SOI) scores of 3 - socializing, 3(4) - socializing with self-authoring emergent and 3/4 - predominantly socializing but with a fully formed self-authoring structure. I use the term *predominantly self-authoring knowers* to refer to the remainder of participants in my purposeful sample, for whom the self-authoring way of knowing was evaluated to be dominant, corresponding to Subject-Object Interview (SOI) scores 4(3) – self-authoring with socializing remnants and 4 – self-authoring. My study was designed to have eight participants: four that were predominantly socializing knowers and four that were predominantly self-authoring knowers.
For all five of the major findings – the three dimensions of complexity referenced above and the two types of professional learning that I found were most helpful to the participants in their transition – I found that the participant’s way of knowing was connected to how they experienced, made sense of, and managed that aspect of their transition.

First, for an increased breadth of responsibility, participants described the assistant principal role as one having a more specialized role, and when they transitioned to the principalship, they explained that they had far greater responsibilities for the entire building. I found that predominantly socializing knowers, David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), struggled to manage their time and determine which priorities were most important (4 of 4). In contrast, Lauren (score = 4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), Rebecca (4(3)), and Regina (4), the predominantly self-authoring participants, told me that they did not feel like they were being pulled in multiple directions and described systems they had created to manage this kind of complexity (4 of 4).

Second, for managing interpersonal conflict, I found that the predominantly socializing knowers, David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4), described how this transition had an enormous impact on them, such that their rise to this level of authority left them feeling lonely or as an outsider (4 of 4) and that it was difficult to manage conflicts and the expectations that others had of them as principals (4 of 4). I also found a qualitative difference in how these principals described their experience with the complexity of managing interpersonal conflict according to whether they were purely socializing (a developmental score of 3) compared to those who were predominantly socializing [a score of 3(4) or 3/4]. David (score = 3), the only purely socializing knower at the time of our interviews, described his experience solely in terms of how he related to others while Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4), and Tamara (3/4),
who were predominantly socializing in their way of knowing but who had some capacity for self-authorship expressed a growing comfort level with being the leader and authority figure but would have liked additional support in managing challenging interpersonal conflicts. In contrast, predominantly self-authoring knowers told me that they understood and appreciated others’ expectations of them as the authority figure and could turn inside to clarify their own beliefs to effectively manage the conflicts that arose (4 of 4).

Third, for clarifying internal values, I found that predominantly socializing knowers with some capacity for self-authorship, Jesse, Carlos, and Tamara, described an awareness of how new principals needed to do the hard work to develop these internal values (3 of 3) while predominantly self-authoring knowers, Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, pointed to these inner values as foundational to meeting the different types of complexity inherent transitioning to the principalship (4 of 4).

Fourth, for the professional learning experience of mentoring, I found that receiving mentoring for David and Jesse, the participants with developmental scores of 3 or 3(4), respectively, was valued because of the affirmation they received from their mentors (2 of 2). In contrast, Carlos, Tamara, Lauren, Kelly, Rebecca, and Regina, the participants with a developmental score of 3/4, 4(3), or 4, said that they valued mentoring primarily as a venue to reflect on and improve their leadership practice (6 of 6).

Fifth, and finally, for the professional learning experiences of leading a large complex project from beginning to end as an assistant principal, I found that only Lauren (score = 4(3)), Kelly (4(3)), Rebecca (4(3)), and Regina (4), the predominantly self-authoring participants, described rich opportunities to take over the leadership of complex projects (4 of 4). At the same time, among the predominantly socializing knowers, David (score = 3), Jesse (3(4)), Carlos (3/4)
said they *wished* they had the opportunity to lead a large, complex project during their time as assistant principal (3 of 4).

**Limitations**

In this section, I detail the limitations of the findings shared in the preceding section as an important precursor to exploring the implications of the findings. First, a natural consequence of choosing a qualitative research methodology is that my findings are not generalizable but instead represent low-level theories that seek to explain the descriptions and understandings of the eight participants (i.e., internal generalizability, Maxwell, 2013) as they learned their way through their transition from assistant principal to principal. Additionally, because of the small sample size of eight participants, the implications will likely be limited. Next, I describe two additional limitations of my research related to the demographics of the participants and the differences in geography and district related to my national sampling strategy.

**Limitation: Demographics of Participants**

My qualitative study sought to explore the experiences and meaning-making of eight participants who were new principals. While there was some diversity among the eight participants in some ways, such as gender (five identify as female, three as male), age (with a mix of late 20s, 30s, and early 40s), and ethnicity (a mix of White, Latino, and Asian), a study of this size inevitably excludes dimensions of diversity not represented among the participants in my study. My study is limited to the description and analysis of the experiences and meaning-making of these eight participants only.

As it happened, gender was unevenly distributed across my two sub-groups, with all four predominantly self-authoring knowers identifying as female (Kelly, Rebecca, Lauren, and Regina) while three of four predominantly socializing knowers identify as male (Jesse, Carlos,
and Derek). I considered the role of gender explicitly throughout my analysis and addressed this in Chapter V, but it is a limitation of my study that I did not have a larger pool with more male and female and participants within each developmental sub-group. As a reminder, when I did my analysis, none of the participants mentioned their age or race as a factor in their transition to becoming a principal. Only one person mentioned gender (Kelly) and only did so in just one segment of one interview. Additionally, with a small sample size, I do not feel I can make any conclusions about patterns that might exist in relation to gender, race, or age. In looking back at my decision to use Constructive-Developmental Theory and Ways of Knowing, one of the places where the theory could be extended is to take into account how gender, race, or age could have influences on one’s way of knowing. A larger research study could allow for a further exploration of each of those factors.

Additionally, some participants were assistant principals in their buildings before becoming principals, while others changed schools, changed districts, or even moved across the country to become principals. At the time of the interviews, some participants were in their roles as principal for three years, while others had just started and were in their first year. These potentially important factors shaped these participants’ experience and could explain some differences in their responses beyond their developmental stage. These different backgrounds and pathways to the principalship could be important influencers and, due to the size of my study, were things for which I could not control and represent another potential limitation of my study.

**Limitation: Differences in Geography and District**

I originally designed my study so that I would be sampling from one large district, large enough that I could recruit participants who had many factors in common so that developmental
differences in their experiences would be more likely to explain the differences in their experience. I needed to change my study after becoming a superintendent within that large district for several reasons, including researcher bias, reactivity, power dynamics, and other potential validity threats. This led me to a national sampling strategy that resulted in a diversity in geographic location, size of the district, level of schooling (elementary, middle, and high), and type of school (public vs. charter) for the participants in my study. This variety of contexts for the participants in my study represents a potential limitation of my study, which I will address in implications for future research.

**Implications**

My research adds the unique perspective of principals who have recently been in both positions as an assistant principal who received this professional learning and then a principal who transitioned into the role. These are participants who can say, with the clarity that comes from recency, what the transition was like for them and what among their learning was most important and useful to them.

One set of major takeaways from my study is a better understanding of how these new principals describe the transition into the principalship and what kinds of learning experiences were helpful to them. The findings of my study have the potential to help assistant principals understand the ways in which their job will be different when they transition to the principalship. For current assistant principals, it will be useful to know what is likely in store for them. In my research, I also asked participants what kinds of learning experiences were helpful to them as they transitioned and what kinds of support they wished they had gotten. For aspiring principals, I hope that my research illuminates how actively seeking out opportunities to grow can be helpful to be better prepared for the new role.
As I noted in Chapter II, there is plenty described in the literature about how to support first-year principals. In addition, many principal preparation programs and large school districts have programs in place to support new principals. However, one implication of my study is that a one-size-fits-all approach will not meet the learning needs of all aspiring principals. In this study, I used a developmental lens to examine how the participants in my study made meaning of their experiences, and I found that there were two main learning experiences that they named as most important to have received or that they wished they had received—that of receiving mentorship and opportunities to lead complex projects. Both of these kinds of learning experiences looked very different depending on the way of knowing of the assistant principal.

Drago-Severson (2004b, 2009, 2016) clearly describes the implications for what mentors should do, given all that we know about how mentees with diverse ways of knowing will receive mentorship. In a similar way, I discuss here the implications for school districts and principals: based on what we now know about the types of complexities inherent in the transition to the principalship and how assistant principals with diverse ways of knowing described and understood the professional learning that was most helpful to them in that transition. I see clear implications for developmentally intentional practice for how districts and individuals can prepare assistant principals to succeed in this transition. I describe each of them below in turn.

**Implications for Aspiring Principal and Principal Mentors**

I found in my study that the professional learning these participants valued and wanted most were not experiences that they could pursue on their own but experiences that required the support of their supervisors. Based on the experiences of the participants in my study, I suggest that aspiring principals should seek out, or be systematically assigned by the district, mentors who will provide them with affirmation, exposure to different kinds of complex responsibilities,
and a holding environment for reflection about what these aspiring principals might do when in these circumstances (Drago-Severson 2009, 2012, 2016). Additionally, I recommend that these aspiring principals seek out, or be systematically assigned, opportunities to lead a complex project school-wide project such as designing a school-wide professional development series to experience first-hand what it is like to be a principal. As I described in Chapter V, Kelly’s and Rebecca’s experiences, in particular, highlight how these complex projects that they led while serving as assistant principals helped them gain experience with the three different dimensions of complexity, I found formed the transition experience for new principals. For example, Kelly told me how as a result of this learning opportunity, she had a “really had a strong sense of how the school needed to be in order for it to function well,” enabling her to more quickly grasp the new breadth of responsibilities inherent in the transition to the principalship.

As I shared in Chapter V, the transition from assistant principal to principal requires a leader to be able to handle increasing levels of complexity and conflict. For new principals, this is often the first time they have managed this level of challenge. One participant, David, even related it to the experience of being a new parent, that despite all the reading and preparation, you just have no idea how difficult and challenging the role will be until you are in it. As assistant principals are preparing for positions as new principals, I believe, based on what I have learned from participants in my study, that they will need to gain exposure to this wider breadth of responsibilities. And critically, as they gain this exposure, I think that they will also need the time and space to process and reflect on how they would manage conflicts, prioritize one’s time amidst competing priorities, and clarify one’s internal values. One of the most important implications of my research is that assistant principals need a place to receive affirmation for the work they are taking on. In order to receive both the exposure and the support, I believe that
aspiring principals should seek out these two types of key learning activities: affirming mentorship for professional growth and leadership of a complex project, both of which will most often require the participation and support of the principal in their building.

**Supporting aspiring principals who are predominantly socializing knowers.** My research was designed to look at the experiences of these participants through a developmental lens, so I was also able to find specific implications for aspiring principals with different ways of knowing. For the aspiring principals who are predominately self-authoring, they shared a higher level of comfort in their own ability to handle the increasing complexities that come with the principalship, and each of them (4 of 4) shared that they felt like they got what they needed as assistant principals to prepare them for the transition. Therefore, in most of this section, I will focus on supporting aspiring principals who are predominantly socializing knowers.

For aspiring principals who are predominantly socializing in their way of knowing, my research shows that their learning opportunities should be designed to help them develop a level of comfort with conflict as an opportunity for positive change rather than something to avoid altogether. These opportunities can be designed to stretch the thinking of these knowers to identify and value their own beliefs in making leadership decisions. This might look like a mentor who secures time with an AP to help plan in advance for a situation that might result in a conflict. Or it could mean spending time with an AP after a conflict to help see how conflicts help allow both parties to clarify values and move forward together.

My study showed that—for the participants in my research—the principal supervising the AP was uniquely situated to mentor the AP and provide them with opportunities to lead complex challenges. As a result, I recommend that the principal must also have an awareness of these findings in order to help prepare the AP for this transition. For instance, for principals that will
be mentoring assistant principals, my recommendation is that mentors engage with the assistant principals to assess their relative strengths and weaknesses and then provide a holding environment that will support and stretch each individual to help them grow the skills that they will need for the principalship.

I recommend that principals mentor with developmental intentionality (Drago-Severson 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016) such that they tailor their mentorship and feedback to make it effective for each AP they mentor. The mentor needs to understand how the AP’s way of knowing will shape how the AP will receive feedback from the mentor. Drago-Severson (2004b, 2009) is clear that providing socializing knowers with leadership roles can be done with developmental intentionality, such that the principal-mentor may need to more involved to explicitly offer affirmation and create an environment conducive for reflection in which the predominantly socializing AP can surface their values in their thinking because my research shows clearly that predominantly socializing knowers need dialogue in order to do this. As Jesse, a predominantly socializing knower, said, he most wished for someone to go along with him the first time he had to take on a challenging task.

**Implications for School Districts**

My research study also helped name the types of supports that participants in my study named—and I think that these could also be helpful assistant principals who are aspiring to other leadership positions. It is important to understand the need to offer different kinds of supports and how to provide differentiated professional learning opportunities for APs based upon their way of knowing. The role of the district is to draw from the research literature, including the findings of this study, to educate and guide principals in the district about how best to support the leadership preparation and learning of the APs they supervise.
One key implication is that assistant principals in this study were not always in a position to get what they need from the principal who supervises them. The principal’s reasons for this were not always clear to the participants in my study, but I offer a few different possibilities based on my analysis of the data and my own experiences as a principal and now as supervisor of principals in my work as superintendent. First, it may be that the supervising principal is relatively new and might not have the bandwidth or capacity to provide this kind of mentorship. Second, the principal may be continually overwhelmed and not have the time and energy to actively mentor the AP. Third, the principal may feel threatened by an AP who wants to become a principal, such that mentoring and developing this person could threaten their own position. Finally, principals might feel like they are preparing the mentees to leave the school and, ultimately, creating more work for the principal. There may be a perverse disincentive at play for principals to provide these kinds of learning experiences to APs. I believe that it takes a magnanimous and well-skilled principal to mentor APs to become future principals. Some principals may recognize that if they are successful at mentoring and supporting these aspiring principals, one day, these aspiring principals will leave your school and become principals elsewhere. Additionally, even if the principal is ready, willing, and able to offer the mentoring, based on my findings, predominantly socializing knowers may struggle to take constructive feedback when their mentor is also their supervisor.

As some of the participants in my study described, not all of them were able to get mentoring. Therefore, I believe that school districts could consider providing additional learning opportunities outside of the school for the aspiring principals that help meet the different needs of assistant principals. I make the following recommendations to district leaders:
● Survey current assistant principals to identify those who desire to be principals and collect information about the kinds of mentoring they are receiving within their existing school.

● Provide opportunities to match assistant principals with additional sources of mentoring led by leaders outside of the aspiring principals’ current school setting.

● Provide training for mentors to help them get a better understanding of adult developmental theory – specifically about how to support adults that are predominantly socializing as well as those that are predominantly self-authoring.

The implications of my study could have a broad systemic reach, and district leaders who explore these solutions suggested by my research may find that they address the problems this study was designed to partially address. As I discussed in Chapters I and II, it has been shown that the skill sets and behaviors of the principal are some of the largest factors in shaping the quality of the experience that students have. It is also important to emphasize that the first year of the principalship is the most challenging for them and that principal turnover and burnout are persistent problems (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Daresh & Alexander, 2015; Mitgang, 2012). The types of learning experiences I have identified in my study may have the potential to smooth out this first-year experience and reduce the number of principals who leave the profession, thereby improving student experience and outcomes.
Recommendations for Further Research

Based on my findings and the limitations I outlined at the start of this chapter, additional research is required to understand more about the experiences of assistant principals as they transition into the principalship. In this section, I share additional ways in which my conclusions can be tested with a broader group of people and additional research questions that my dissertation has raised for me.

First, because my study was qualitative and focused on learning from eight participants, it is important to attempt to further validate my findings. Converting some of my conclusions into quantitative inquiries that could be investigated across a larger sample would enable generalizations that could add scope and credence to the implications.

Second, the nature of my study allowed me to interview participants over a narrow window of time; it would be valuable to follow participants longitudinally over the course of several months and years to understand how their understanding of the transition evolved. While my study included participants with different amounts of experience as principals, with two participants in their first year of the principalship (Carlos and Lauren), two participants in their second year (Jesse and Rebecca), and four participants in their third year (David, Tamara, Kelly, and Regina), each of participants were only able to share what they were thinking at that particular moment in time. Ideally, future research would gather insights from participants while they are assistant principals and follow them as they transition over into the principalship and allow them to share reflections over the first several years of being a new principal. Many of the participants in my research shared that they had learned a great deal in just the several months preceding the interviews. For example, I interviewed Carlos in December and January of his first year of being a principal. If, in theory, I had the opportunity to interview Carlos over the next
few years, I would have had the opportunity to follow the evolution of Carlos’s thinking over
time. It also would have been even more valuable to hear from Carlos in his final years as an
assistant principal before taking on the principal role. Research shows that with additional
exposure and opportunities for growth, adults are able to expand their developmental capacity
could track the evolution of the developmental capacity of these principals in “real-time” by
following participants over the course of several years as they move from assistant principal to
principal.

Third, further research could study a cohort of principals in a single district to better
isolate how developmental capacities might influence the transition of assistant principals into
the principalship. One of the limitations I mentioned earlier in this chapter was that the
participants in this study came from many different settings – the schools were located in
districts with different supervisory structures, student populations, and teacher union
involvement. Each of these can be factors in the experiences of the participants. Locating the
future study in a single district can limit the variations in context and might spotlight the
differences due to developmental differences.

Fourth, my study did not examine the relationship between ways of knowing and school
performance. I did not gather principal evaluations, in part because each of the participants
belong to distinct districts and different evaluation schemes.

Chapter Summary and Reflections

In conclusion, in this final chapter, I reviewed the findings and limitations of my
dissertation study with eight participants who all transitioned from assistant principal to
principal. Then, I offered overarching implications of supporting aspiring principals by providing
deliberate mentoring by supervisors and providing opportunities to lead complex leadership projects. I shared how this might look within the school building and at the district level.

During the many hours I spent interviewing and listening to the participants, I developed a deep connection with the challenging experiences they were going through. Each of them was driven by a noble calling to education and was dedicated to improving themselves so that they could be the very best principals for their schools. Their stories of struggles and challenges were instantly relatable. Occasionally in my interviews, I would pause and offer reassurances that they were making a big difference in their students' and families’ lives despite whatever struggles they may be facing. After spending many hours with participants in my study and reflecting on my own journey as a leader, I am ever hopeful we can help prepare future leaders and support them to become successful principals.

Finally, there’s no easy way of summarizing the events of the past twelve months. Our lives have been turned upside down because of a pandemic that has spread across the entire globe and claimed the lives of over 500,000 people in the United States. Many of the classrooms across the country have been closed for months, and as a society, we are all eagerly awaiting a time when we can all be back together in our schools and classrooms. Our society has also been torn apart due to a greater awakening about the disparate impacts of race and class. Millions have marched in our streets demanding change in how we police our citizens and value Black lives. The challenge for our schools is greater than ever before. Perhaps it is naive of me, but I believe that our schools will play an essential role in our journey out of this twin pandemic of COVID and systemic racism.

I acknowledge that all of the interviews conducted for this study were conducted in the months immediately preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. The stories and the experiences of
principals told here do not contain the words quarantine, social distancing, and proper ventilation. As a superintendent working with 48 schools in New York City, I have observed first-hand just how much more complicated and challenging the principal’s job has become. To lead schools, principals have become front-line healthcare workers, ventilation experts, and press secretaries. Their work has also extracted a severe emotional toll as making key decisions in the school often meant trading off some public health risk to have more students learning in school. The challenges and complexities inherent in the principalship have only magnified since the completion of the data collection for this study. However, I also know that many principals have become much more resilient and stronger as a result. I am confident that the findings of this study can be of help to the brand-new principals in facing these new challenges.
References


227


Appendix A

Interview 1 Protocol For Principals

Name of Interviewee: ______________________________________

Site: ______________________________________

Date: ______________________________________

Duration of Interview: ______________________________________

Welcome, Gratitude, and Logistics

A. Appreciation & Overview

Thank you very much for volunteering to help me with my project and for taking the time to talk with me today! Your participation is greatly appreciated, and it will contribute to new understandings about how principals describe, understand, and make meaning of the professional development supports they received while they transitioned from assistant principal to principal.

Thank you for returning the informed consent form, and for participating in my research as a doctoral candidate in education leadership at Teachers College. Do you have any questions of me at this time? Do you have questions about anything else?

In a few minutes, we are going to start the interview. As I mentioned, this interview should take about 90 minutes. Please know that you are free to stop the interview at any time and that you don’t have to answer any question that you choose not to, okay? Everything that you share with me is entirely up to you, and I completely trust and respect whatever you decide to share. I see you as an expert on your experience. Thank you very much for making time to share with me.

Before we begin, I would like to say a little more about why I am interested in learning from you and why I am really interested in this project. I am interested in the topic of assistant principal-to-principal transition topic because I strongly believe that successful schools need well supported principals. I believe that cultivating and supporting principals is one of the most important responsibilities of superintendents and of school districts. I believe that there is much to be learned about best practices for supporting new school leaders, especially about how taking into account their learning styles and developmental needs can lead to better support for them.

B. Taping

To make sure that I can listen very carefully while we are talking, and so that I can go back later and review what you have shared with me, is it still okay with you if I audio record our conversation? The tape recording will be transcribed, which means that someone will transcribe the recording, so that I can have a printout of our conversation. The transcripts of our interviews will also be kept confidential, and no one other than me and the people who are...
helping me with this research (like my professors at Teachers College and other graduate students who are also working on research) will be allowed to see them. Also, I promise not to include any identifying information in these transcripts if I share them with others, so no one reading them will know that you were the person talking. Do you have any questions about this? Does this still work for you?

C. Confidentiality

As a researcher, I will write about what you share with me to help people learn about what you and the others in this study say about how teachers describe, understand, and receive growth scores, and how they support professional learning. However, when writing about your experiences, I will protect your confidentiality and privacy by replacing your real name with a pseudonym/alias that you select, and I will also disguise the name of your school or organization. This way, readers will be able to learn about the insights and examples you’ve shared without knowing that you were the one who shared them. Do you have any questions about this? Also, do you have any ideas for a pseudonym? We can pick one now, or at a later time in the study so you have more time to think about it.

Pseudonym: ________________________________

D. Interview Questions

In a few minutes, we will begin the interview. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions that I will ask. My goal is to understand your experiences as someone who transitioned from assistant principal to principal. In this interview, you are the expert on your experience and my goal is to learn from you!

Do you have any questions about me or the study or anything else before we begin?? If you have any questions at any time, please let me know.

E. Begin Taping, begin digital recording

Hello, the date is [insert date] and I am meeting with [insert pseudonym].

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. For clarification purposes for the recording, can you please confirm that you have signed the Teacher’s College informed consent form for this interview, and have agreed to be recorded on tape?

Thank you so much. Now we will begin.

Background Questions and Prior Experience

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to answer my research questions in today’s interview and to also share your feedback in the follow-up we will conduct at a later time. I will send you a copy of the transcript of this interview before then so you have time to review it. I truly value your input, insight, and time. Thank you very much for your help!

Section A: Warm-Up

To get to know a little bit more about you, I’m going to begin with some background questions about your school, is that ok?
1. How many students are in your school?
2. Please describe what you would consider to be any unique characteristics of your school

Section B: Prior Roles and Background
3. I would love to learn more about your prior roles in education.
   a. What prior roles have you had before becoming a principal?
   b. Where did you work? For how long in each role?
   c. Can you tell me a bit more about the responsibilities you had in those prior roles?

Section C: Current Role
4. I’d like to learn about the various responsibilities of your current role as principal.
   a. What are your primary responsibilities?
   b. What is working well for you?
   c. What, if anything, is challenging for you, given these responsibilities?

Section D: Timeline of Events in the Past Two Years in Relation to Your Principalship
5. Okay, so now I'd like to give you a chance to make a quick timeline for the past two years as it relates your development and growth as a school leader, one that would encompass the last year(s) as an assistant principal, and your transition to being a new principal. My main interest is in what supports or challenges were important in your development as a leader. You can use whatever time markers are most helpful to you.
   a. Please take 5-10 minutes to sketch out a quick timeline.
   b. Take just a moment to note the most significant events in your professional life during that time (high points, low points, most eye-opening moments, most formative moments, moments of clarity or learning).
   c. Okay, now note or circle any moments where your thinking either shifted or developed when it comes to the role of the principal. Consider what situations, challenges, supports, or people may have been influential in your thinking or feelings related to your readiness and understanding of the principalship.

Section E: Learning Experiences as Assistant Principal
6. Thinking back to when you were an assistant principal, can you describe some of the ways you were supported that were most helpful to preparing you for the principalship? If it’s helpful, you can refer to the timeline you just made.
   a. Can you tell me about a critical incident or a particularly memorable story that occurred? Something caused a shift in your thinking? Can you walk me through that experience?
   b. What about this experience made it so supportive?
      i. What did you learn from this experience?
      ii. How, if at all, did that help you make that transition to the principalship?
   b. What about relationships that may have helped you?
   c. What about mentors?
   d. And any kinds of networks that were helpful?

7. Now, I am curious to learn more about what was challenging for you as an assistant principal. If it’s helpful, you can refer to the timeline you just made.
a. Can you tell me about a critical incident or a particularly memorable story that occurred that represented a challenge? Something caused a shift in your thinking? Can you walk me through that experience?
b. What about this experience made it so challenging?
   i. What did you learn from this experience?
   ii. How, if at all, did that help you make that transition to the principalship?
c. Do you have any more examples or other challenges?
d. Were any of these challenges eventually helpful in preparing you for the principalship?
e. What about things that were barriers for you to be a successful AP?
   i. Was there anything that was NOT significant or NOT helpful?
   ii. What, if anything, do you feel was missing from your prior preparation?

8. Sometimes we don’t know what we need until we are confronted with new challenges. Looking back now, knowing what you know, what is something that you learned as an AP that ended up being more helpful than you initially imagined it would be when you first learned about it?

Section F: Wrap-up, Gratitude, and Previews of Next Steps
I want to thank you very much for all that you have so generously shared with me today. I really appreciate your time, your trust, and your willingness to think so carefully about these important questions. Please know that what you shared will make an important contribution to my research. I have just a few more questions before we wrap up.

9. Is there anything you would like to add to what you shared earlier?

10. Do you have any questions for me?

There will be an opportunity for you to provide feedback on this interview and my own follow-up questions in a second interview. Before then, I will send you the transcripts of this interview for your review, questions and comments. If you have questions that arise after this interview, please do not hesitate to contact me. I will do my best to answer all of your questions. Thank you so very much for your time and contribution to my study.
Appendix B

Interview 2 Protocol For Principals

Name of Interviewee: ______________________________________

Site: ____________________________________________________

Date: ______________________

Duration of Interview: ______________________________________

Welcome, Gratitude, and Logistics

A. Appreciation & Overview
   Thank you very much for volunteering to help me with my project and for taking the time
to talk with me today! I really earned a lot from you the last time we talked and I really
appreciate your time. This is our second and final interview in the process.

B. Taping
   Is it still okay with you if I audio record our conversation? I promise not to include any
   identifying information in these transcripts if I share them with others. Do you have any
   questions about this?

C. Interview Questions
   In a few minutes, we will begin the interview. Please know that there are no right or
   wrong answers to the questions that I will ask. My goal is to understand your experiences as
   someone who transitioned from assistant principal to principal. In this interview, I will be
   following up on some of the things you brought up in your first interview and anything else that
   comes up for you as you think about your transition from assistant principal to principal.
   Do you have any questions about me or the study or anything else before we begin? If
   you have any questions at any time, please let me know.

D. Begin Taping, begin digital recording
   Hello, the date is [insert date] and I am meeting with [insert pseudonym].

Background Questions and Prior Experience

Section A: Warm up and member check
I was able to learn so much from you in our last interview. We will start by looking over the
transcript from last time and giving you a chance to add any additional thoughts that came up.

1. To begin, is there anything that you would like to add to what we discussed last time?

2. Do you have any comments you would like to make about the transcript I sent you of that
   interview?

3. Do you have any questions about our first interview?
a. Or, this project, so far?

4. I made a table of the things you identified last time as supports and challenges you had as you transitioned from assistant principal to principal. Can we look at it together?
   a. Is there anything jumping out at you as incorrect?
   b. Is there anything that you think is missing or you would like to add?
   c. Do the initial themes make sense to you?
   d. Would you do it another way?

**Section B: Supports They Wish They Had**

5. Last time, we focused on the experiences and learning opportunities while you were an assistant principal that helped prepare you for the principalship. You mentioned XX, YY, and ZZ. Give what you know now, what is one part of your job now that you feel like is the most difficult part of being a new principal?
   a. Did you feel like you were prepared for this?
      i. Can you tell me about a critical incident or a particularly memorable story that would exemplify this?
      ii. What was it about this that made it difficult?
      iii. What did you feel as you were going through it?
      iv. Do you feel like you are better at _____ now?
         1. If yes, when and how did you eventually learn how to get better?
         2. If no, what did you try and why did they not work?
   b. Are there other things that also feel like a challenge for you?
      i. (Iterate through previous probing question)

6. It sounds like you really felt like you could have use more support for ____. Let’s say we could have provided this support to you earlier, while you were still an assistant principal, what format would that support take?
   a. Would this support be formal/informal?
   b. Who would lead it?
   c. How frequently would it make sense for this to occur?

**Section C: Recommendations**

7. Based on what you have learned from your own transition, I want you to imagine that you are in a new role: coaching an assistant principal in another school who knows that she will become a new principal in September. How would you advise them to proceed?

8. Let us say that you are in a central office leadership position and are in charge of designing specific learning opportunities targeted at assistant principals who aspire to becoming principals in your district. What would you include? And why?

9. At the beginning of the interview, we looked at this table of “supports and challenges.” I’ve been adding to it as we have been talking. Can we take one final look at it?
   a. Is there anything jumping out at you as incorrect?
   b. Is there anything that you think is missing or you would like to add?
Section D: Closing

I want to thank you very much for all that you have so generously shared with me today. I really appreciate your time, your trust, and your willingness to think so carefully about these important questions. I have just a few more questions before we wrap up.

10. Is there anything you would like to add to what you shared earlier?

11. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again. It has been very helpful and interesting to talk with you about your experience. I will send you the transcripts of this interview for your review, questions and comments. If you have questions that arise after this interview, please do not hesitate to contact me.

If you want to be updated on the status of the research, you can call or email me. Here is a little thank you gift. I wish you good luck with the rest of the year!
Appendix C

Letter Of Invitation For Participants

Alan Y. Cheng
Teachers College, Columbia University

Dear Colleague:

My name is Alan Cheng and I am currently a Superintendent in the NYC Department of Education. I am writing to invite you to participate in research that I am conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation in the Organization & Leadership Department at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Prior to my current job, I worked as a NYC high school principal for eight years. I know how difficult and challenging this job can be. I have vivid memories of my first year as a new principal and I recall a strong desire to connect with others in similar roles. Now as a more experienced principal, I strongly believe that successful schools need well supported principals. I believe that cultivating and supporting principals is one of the most important responsibilities of superintendents and of school districts. The current research literature shows that there is much to be learned about best practices for supporting new school leaders, especially about how taking into account their learning styles and developmental needs can lead to better support for them. This is my passion and I really believe we can do a better job of supporting new school leaders.

For this dissertation, I am focusing on how principals describe and understand their transition from assistant principal to principal. I am most interested in what these principals identify as professional learning experiences, and how these experiences have supported them in this transition. My hope is to add your experiences to the body of research in this area.

If you agree to participate in my research, I will ask you to do two things: (a) participate in one ninety-minute phone interview with an independent researcher, and (b) participate in two ninety-minute in-person interview with a separate independent researcher.

In return for your participation, you will be provided with your personal results of the Subject-Object Interview, and a copy of the research findings. If you are interested and you might be willing to participate in this study, please reply to this message. There will be an opportunity for a pre-interview phone conference where I will provide greater details about confidentiality, anonymity, other details about my research, and of course I would be happy to address any questions that you have.

Sincerely,

Alan Y. Cheng
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Investigator
Alan Y. Cheng
Teachers College, Columbia University
Urban Education Leadership Program
(646) 961-3839

Research Title: Assistant Principal Transitions into the Principalship: a Qualitative Study
Informed by Constructive Developmental Theory

Investigator’s Statement

I am inviting you to help me as I research principal perspectives the transition between the role of the assistant principal to the principal. This research is part of the requirements for my doctoral dissertation work at Teachers College, Columbia University. The purpose of my research is to explore an identified gap in research around assistant principal to principal transitions and how professional learning experiences influence those transitions.

I am interested in the topic of assistant principal-to-principal transition topic because I strongly believe that successful schools need well supported principals. I believe that cultivating and supporting principals is one of the most important responsibilities of superintendents and of school districts. I believe that there is much to be learned about best practices for supporting new school leaders, especially about how taking into account their learning styles and developmental needs can lead to better support for them. The principal perspective is missing from this body of literature, and it is my hope that this study might contribute to a need for qualitative research on this topic.

This study is important because it might help district leaders, experienced and new principals better understand how we can best support assistant principals as they transition into principals.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time, should you wish to do so. Your participation involves three interviews, which will each last approximately ninety minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded.
and then transcribed. The digital audio files will be kept on my password-protected computer and will not be shared.

**Risks and Benefits**

The harm or discomfort anticipated in the research is not greater than what would normally be encountered in an information-gathering interview. You will not be required to reveal information such as specific project names, technologies, or proprietary information that would be inappropriate to share with external parties. Your participation is strictly voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time with no penalty or fear of recourse. As the researcher, I will ensure your anonymity and confidentiality. There is no penalty or consequence for not participating in this study. You are not likely to benefit directly from this study, but I hope it will contribute to a broader understanding of how principals in New York City describe, understand, and make meaning of the professional development supports they received while they transitioned from assistant principal to principal.

**Procedures**

If you decide to participate in this study, I would like to interview you during this summer and this fall (July-December 2019). Participation involves one structured phone interview with a research assistant, and two semi-structured, in-depth interviews that will last approximately ninety-minutes each. After each interview, I will transcribe it and share the transcription with you. I may also want to follow up to clarify anything that we discussed in the interview.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interviews so that I can have an accurate record of our conversation. I will keep everything that I hear and record in the interview strictly confidential. A pseudonym will be used when sharing any data collected. The only other people who will have access to the information that I gather will be my advisor and my research colleagues.

**Data Storage to Protect Confidentiality**

Your confidentiality as a participant is of the utmost importance and will be a priority in the research process. You will not be personally identified in any report or publication resulting from this research. You and your work location will be given pseudonyms. No names will appear on any of the digital audio records. All digital audio records will be labeled by pseudonym and will be stored on my password-protected computer. All forms of personal identification will be erased and eliminated. I will maintain the data, in their coded form, on my password-protected server only for any post-dissertation research.

**Time Involvement**

This research project will occur from July to December 2019. I anticipate the three interviews to take approximately four to five hours of your time.

**Compensation**

I appreciate your voluntary participation in this study, as it will be adding to the body of knowledge on the very important topic of how assistant principal to principal transition. No payment is implied or provided for your voluntary participation.
How Results will be Used

I will use the results of this study for my doctoral dissertation. In addition, I may present my findings at conferences or meetings, publish articles in journals, publish a manuscript, or use the information for educational purposes. In these venues, you and your work location will not be identified; I will use pseudonyms.

Participant’s Rights

● I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures of this study.
● My participation in research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time, with no penalty or fear of recourse.
● The researcher may withdraw me from the research at her professional discretion.
● If, during the course of this study, significant new information has developed that may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the researcher will provide this information to me.
● Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
● If at any time I have questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the researcher, who will answer my questions. The researcher’s phone number is (646) 961-3839. The researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Ellie Drago-Severson, at Teachers College, Columbia University, can be reached at (212) 678-4163.
● If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Teachers College, Columbia University Institutional Review Board /IRB. The phone number for the IRB is (212) 678-4105. Or, I can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY, 10027, Box 151.
● I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant’s Rights document.

Check one:
____ I give my permission for the researcher to digitally record my interview.
____ I DO NOT give permission for the researcher to digitally record my interview.

Check one:
____ I give my permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.
____ I DO NOT give my permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

_____________________________  ___________________________  ___________
Signature of Participant       Printed Name               Date
## Appendix E

### Dissertation Timeline—Updated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Month, Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proposal hearing</td>
<td>June 29, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise dissertation proposal</td>
<td>January 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit TC IRB application</td>
<td>February 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC IRB approval</td>
<td>March 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit DOE IRB application</td>
<td>March 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin recruitment of participants</td>
<td>Oct-Nov 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Object Interview (SOI)</td>
<td>Dec 2019 - Feb 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct qualitative interviews – Interview 1</td>
<td>Dec 2019 - Feb 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin coding 1(^{st}) round of interviews</td>
<td>Jan 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct qualitative interviews – Interview 2</td>
<td>Jan 2020 – March 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin coding 2(^{nd}) round of interviews</td>
<td>March 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing and revision</td>
<td>August 2020-March 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Draft to Committee Members</td>
<td>March 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct dissertation defense</td>
<td>April, 13 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise, edit based on feedback from dissertation committee</td>
<td>April 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit dissertation</td>
<td>April 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Subject-Object Interview Protocol (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MATERIALS</th>
<th>Ten (10) subject cards (3” x 7”); pencil; tape recorder and ninety (90) minute tape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREPPING THE SUBJECT</td>
<td>Subject needs to know he/she:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Is participating in a 90 minute interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. The goal of which is to learn “how you think about things,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“how you make sense of your own experience,” etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Doesn’t have to talk about anything he/she doesn’t want to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants will be presented with a series of 10 stimulus cards with the following topic labels:
1. Anger
2. Anxious / Nervous
3. Success
4. Strong stand / Conviction
5. Sad
6. Torn
7. Moved / Touched
8. Lost something
9. Change
10. Important to me

The interviewer tells the participant that the cards are for his/her use only, that no-one else will them, and that he/she can take them with him/her or throw them away after the interview. The participant is told that the cards are just to help the subject jot down things the participant might want to talk about in the interview.

The participant is told, “We will spend the first 10 minutes or so with the cards and then talk together for about an hour and a half about those things you jotted down on the cards which you choose to talk about. We do not have to talk about anything you don’t want to talk about. Please feel free to include teaching or learning experiences if you like.”

1) “Now let’s take the first card (Angry). If you were to think back over the last several months, even the last couple of years, and you had to think about a time you felt really angry about something, or times you got really mad or felt a sense of outrage or violation— are there 2 or 3 things that come to mind. You can use education experiences or any other experiences you like. Take a minute to think about it, if you like, and just jot down on the card whatever you need to remind you of what they were.” (If nothing comes to mind for a particular card, skip it and go on to the next card.)
2) (Anxious, Nervous) “...if you were to think of some time when you found yourself being really scared about something, nervous, anxious about something, in school or out...”

3) (Success) “...if you were to think of some times when you felt kind of triumphant, or that you had achieved something that was difficult for you, or especially satisfying that you were afraid might come out another way, or a sense that you had overcome something...”

4) (Strong stand. Conviction) “...if you were to think of some times when you had to take a strong stand, or felt very keenly ‘This is what I think should or should not be done about this,’ times when you became aware of a particular conviction you held...”

5) (Sad) “...felt real sad about something, perhaps something that even made you cry, or left you feeling on the verge of tears...”

6) (Torn) “...felt really in conflict about something, where someone or some part of you felt one way or was urging you on in one direction, and someone else or some other part was feeling another way; times when you really felt kind of tom about something...”

7) (Moved, Touched) “...felt quite touched by something you saw or thought or heard, perhaps something that even caused your eyes to tear up, something that moved you...”

8) (Lost something) “...times you had to leave something behind, or were worried that you might lose something or someone; ‘good-bye’ experiences, the ends of something important or valuable; losses...”

9) (Change) “As you look back at your past, if you had to think of some ways in which you think you’ve changed over the last few years— or even months, if that seems right—are there some ways that come to mind?”

10) (Important to me) “If I were just to ask you, ‘What is it that is most important to you?’ or ‘What do you care deepest about?’ or ‘What matters most?’—are there 1 or 2 things that come to mind, in connection with your education experiences or anything else?”

Part II: Probing for Meaning-Making Structures: The Interview

“Now we have more than an hour to talk about some of these things you’ve recalled or jotted down. You can decide where we start. Is there one card you’d like to start with?”

Now the probing for structure part of the interview begins. The interviewer focuses on bringing forth statements that help reveal more clearly the participant’s meaning making of the experience the participant describes, in accordance with the principles learned through specific SOI training.