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LEADERSHIP MATTERS:
DEVELOPING AND GROWING PRINCIPALS TO LEAD HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOL

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
Education Systems Improvement Science

by

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December 2023

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

The role of a principal has changed since its inception. This dissertation explores the transformative role of school principals in the American educational landscape. With a keen focus on the historical and contemporary nuances, this study meticulously traced the evolution of the term “principal.” The underlying dynamics shaped by gender biases, stringent accountability measures, and the innate pressures enveloping the position are highlighted. An emphasis is placed on principals leading high-needs schools, revealing a spectrum of challenges, often intensified by socio-economic and infrastructural disparities. The study delved into these leaders’ diverse experiences and expectations through qualitative lenses of semi-structured interviews and surveys, offering insights into the resilience and adaptability demanded by such roles. The study underscores the imperative of equipping principals with the requisite skills and resources to lead with efficacy, especially in high-needs settings. Specifically, the study focused on three overarching research questions. First, how do superintendents or their designees develop and grow principals to lead high-needs schools? Second, how are superintendents or their designees currently developing and growing principals to lead high-needs schools? Third, how can we create a framework to grow and develop principals to lead high-needs schools? These findings of the study could contribute significantly to the discourse on educational leadership, emphasizing the pivotal role of principal development in shaping school culture, pedagogic outcomes, and overall student success through a learner-centric approach and ongoing and continuous professional development aligned to the principal and school needs. Principals need a cadence of coaching and mentoring through a community of practice.

DEDICATION

Glory be to the God! Hallelujah!

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, family, friends, and work family, who have supported me through this learning process. Through pushing, prodding, and persisting in working with me as I engaged on this journey.

In addition, this dissertation is dedicated to my four wonderful adult children, Racquel, Haley, Caisey, and Michael, who always encouraged me to hand the baton to get to the next hurdle.

Next, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my mentor and friend, Dr. Lee Westberry, who pushed me to continue the journey and shine bright like a diamond. Thank you for your words of encouragement and dedication to the development of principals.

Finally, I especially want to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Charles Dickson, who always gave me the words, encouragement, smiles, phone calls, and support to begin and complete this dissertation journey. I appreciate your time reading, editing, and giving academic and emotional feedback to me even when I did not ask. Also, thank you for allowing me to turn not one but two rooms into research rooms. I love you, and words cannot express how much I have enjoyed accomplishing this milestone with you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the term *principal* in the American educational lexicon has been debated with constant change and upheaval (Christensen et al., 2018). From positionality based on gender to intense accountability measures, the position of principal has been one of importance and prestige as well as pressure and strife. It is from this vantage point that this study was undertaken. Understanding the vast experiences, needs, expectations, and, in some cases, limitations that engulf the position, this study examined the construct of serving as a school principal in the most challenging circumstances: leading a high-needs school. Emanating from this position, the overarching research question was examined: How do school districts systematically develop principals who lead high-needs schools?

School districts nationwide have launched infinite reform movements to help improve teaching and learning in all schools. At the heart of these reforms, school districts have moved away from developing principals to focusing on instruction within the classroom (Honig, 2012). Along the way, the quest to educate America's youth has slowly transitioned from utilizing untrained teachers and principal teachers to employing highly educated professionals. In the early years of the American educational system, teachers and school headmasters were tapped to lead the schools (Lynch, 2016). However, as the number of schools increased and grade levels were established, school systems created the position of the principal-teacher. This position combines both the teacher's role of instructing students AND the principal's role of leading the school. The specialization of these roles necessitates highly educated professionals in United

States schools. Consequently, professional development has been advanced to grow the educational workforce continuously.

Professional development opportunities have flourished for teachers throughout history as teaching techniques and strategies have improved (Bryk et al., 2015). However, early principal teachers did not receive the same rigorous approaches or ongoing professional development for the principalship. Over the years, principal-teachers transformed into the academic authority of the schools with minimal training beyond their initial certification. Continued learning is paramount to a leader's success as changes keep coming. Due to the complexities of today's demands, principals need more ongoing coaching, mentoring, and support for their development and growth. In addition, today's school leaders face scrutiny as accountability increases and high expectations drive the narrative. Principals who can increase student achievement and build capacity with their teachers will be a beacon of light for all students and schools in the United States (Grissom et al., 2020).

The Beginning of the Principalship

Initial iterations of the principal-teacher most likely saw a white male responsible for all the duties from clerical to administrative tasks in running and maintaining a school. Those duties included taking attendance, assigning teachers, ordering supplies, and ensuring the school day began and ended on time. These responsibilities gave the principal-teacher a sense of authority in communicating with the district administrator.

Kafka (2009) cited Paul Revere Pierce's (1935) monograph, *The Origin, and Development of the Public School Principalship*, in examining the history of principalship and how the development of the position came to fruition. Pierce (1935) documented and

demonstrated the mundane and complex nature of the principal's work. In addition to the complex nuances of the principal teacher's role, the position also gained authority over other teachers by ensuring teachers took attendance and taught the students. In certain cities, the principal-teacher expanded his institutional power by achieving independence and autonomy as supervision over teachers increased. The principal-teacher did not obtain these formal powers in other cities until decades later (Kafka, 2009). In some cases, the principal-teacher was a veteran teacher, a teacher liked by board members, or a teacher who was the last who would accept the position. Those who desired the appointment of the principal teacher were only required to be male and to be a teacher (Kafka, 2009).

A formal degree was not required to serve as a principal-teacher during the nineteenth century. Fleming (1994) noted this distinction in principal-teacher requirements, stating that circumstance rather than preparation or talent led to the selection of the principal teacher; therefore, untrained individuals supervised the school buildings. These early principal/teachers worked without job descriptions, legal guidelines, or professional support. According to Kafka (2009), the principal-teacher supervised and rated school personnel; this hierarchy began a positional evolution in which respect and prestige were afforded to the role of the principal. This evolution continued as parents eventually sought the principal's advice and demonstrated care for his authority.

Pierce (1935) stated that the principal-teacher was the decisive factor in a school's success. He was responsible for the management, the instruction, and securing the best educational results for the school building. However, during the nineteenth century, the

principal-teacher did not receive support, coaching, or mentoring to build their capacity for the position's responsibilities.

The Principal in Modern Times

Moving from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century, the role of the principal-teacher continued, with the exceptions of mowing the grass and hiring and firing teachers. However, as time passed, the principal-teacher lost his teaching assignments and primarily became a manager, administrator, supervisor, instructional leader, and politician (Rousmaniere, 2007) and also assumed a new title. The new title was principal. The principalship in the twentieth century included making decisions such as determining student promotions to the next grade, purchasing textbooks, and maintaining the school buildings. Also, the principal supervised teachers within the building while disciplining the students.

In addition, these leaders began to increase their power in the local communities by creating associations to discuss problems and reports for the superintendents and school boards. The associations formed during this period were the National Association of Elementary Schools (NAES), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the National Education Association (NEA). The creation of these associations professionalized the principal position and encouraged the states to have standards for the job. These standards required principals to have higher certifications, academic qualifications, and specialized prerequisites for consideration. Cuban (1988) explained that principals are the professional leaders of the school. The principal works for the same ends as the classroom teacher, but his pupils are the teachers. Cuban (1988) explained that a leader's skill is primarily the principal's worth. Thus, his first goal is to teach and grow the teachers professionally.

Superintendents expect principals to observe classroom lessons daily without teaching duties or responsibilities. The district administration also expects principals to conference with teachers, provide instruction and advice on refining teaching practices, and ultimately rate teachers on their performance and students' performance. These are the expected expectations of today's principals, especially with struggling and new teachers. The principalship has morphed and changed since the first mention of the principal's job (or title) (Rousmaniere, 2013).

These responsibilities of a school leader are complex and, in some respects, never-ending and, at times, taxing to some and burdensome to others. However, the professional progression of tasks and responsibilities of principals is further complicated when issues of race are interjected into the professional or job paradigm by single-race schools that are most likely to assume leadership by African American principals (Brown, 2005). Therefore, the following section examines the intersection of race and the principalship viewed through the African American perspective.

The Perplexing Plight of African American Principals

Pre-Brown Versus Board of Education (1954)

In examining the perplexing plight of African American principals (Tillman, 2004), a close examination of the periods before and after one of the most pivotal cases in the nation, *Brown vs. Board of Education (1954)*, is needed. Linda C. Tillman (2004) stated that pre-Brown African American principals committed themselves to educating Black children, worked with other Black leaders to establish schools for children, and worked in all-Black schools, usually in substandard conditions. African American principals represented the Black community and were seen as the authority on educational, social, and economic issues. The African American

principal's job at school reflected the culture of the community. In the pre-Brown era, African American principals cultivated African American teachers for their schools and created a pipeline of African American educators for the principalship. Although, in the pre-Brown period, African American principals worked in buildings needing significant renovations, African American schools were usually given second-hand books and resources for their teachers to use (Karpinski, 2006).

From the eighteenth century through the 1950s, Black children were educated by African American professional elites such as ministers, journalists, and politicians (Tillman, 2004). African American ministers were instrumental in opening schools in the North, especially in the South. Tillman (2004) stated that principals or headmasters strongly believed that while Blacks could be stripped of their money, civil rights, and property, the knowledge they acquired through education could not be taken away. For example, in 1826, African Methodist Episcopal bishop Daniel Payne started a school in Charleston, South Carolina, for free Black children and enslaved adults. However, Tillman (2004) stated that the school closed in 1834 when Whites became fearful that free Blacks might have access to literature by abolitionists. This led the South Carolina legislature to pass a law prohibiting free Blacks from having "any school or other place of instruction for teaching any slave or free person of color to read or write" (Franklin, 1990).

Like Daniel Payne, Septima Clark taught in Charleston, South Carolina, for over 40 years. She was fired because she admitted her membership and refused to relinquish her position with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1956, South Carolina passed a statute prohibiting city and state employees from being members of civil rights organizations (Barnett, 1993). Throughout teaching and advocating Septima Clark was aware of

Black and White teachers' salary discrepancies, the vast differences in support, and the inequitable teaching conditions in the South's segregated schools (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Septima Clark pioneered the grassroots citizenship education movement and was called the "mother of the movement" (Hall et al., 2010, p. 35).

African American women played exemplary roles in educating Black children in the pre-Brown era. Alston and Jones (2002) stated that educated African American women opened schools in the North, especially in the South, and served in dual roles as teachers and principals from 1907 through 1967. According to Franklin (1990), African American female educators participated in similar professional and social activities as men but faced various forms of gender discrimination as supervisors. For example, African American female educators trained for the leader exhibited strong leadership skills and shared the philosophies of their African American male counterparts; however, female leaders faced opposition in not receiving the same benefits or treatment (Franklin, 1990).

In the pre-Brown era, African American women and men became the central figures in segregated schooling and the community (Savage, 2001). African American principals connected and liaised between the school and the community (Tillman, 2004). For example, African American principals encouraged parents and the community to raise funds and donate resources to the schools. This allowed the African American principals to see the community members as professional role models for the teachers and the students (Walker, 2001). Were the African American principals a liaison between the Black and White communities? With the White community, African American principals requested funding, resources, and other forms of support for their schools. African American principals' authority and autonomy stood out within

the Black community but were neglected within the White community by the school boards and superintendents. According to Walker (2000), African American principals could consult with the White community but did not have the power to make decisions or policy changes. African American principals understood how they were accountable for the education of the Black community as a race but were limited in their efforts (Walker & Archung, 2003).

Post-Brown Versus Board of Education

After *Brown versus Board of Education*, White males dominated the principalship, especially in the South. Rousmaniere (2013) and Brown (2005) examined the effects of the *Brown versus Board of Education* (1954) decisions through the lens of the principal. Both authors noted that desegregation worked or failed by excluding African American school leaders from participating in policymaking. This was evident in the South as the statistics showed the decline of African Americans in principalships. Research by Karpinski (2006) indicated a dramatic decrease in African American principals in Kentucky; the number of African American principals decreased from 350 to 36 principals between 1954 and 1970. In Maryland, Black principals decreased by fifty percent in secondary schools and twenty-seven percent overall. During the same period, the number of white principals increased by 167 percent. In North Carolina, a neighboring state, African American principals decreased by 95 percent between 1963 to 1970. In addition, African American principals losing their jobs affected leadership and directly affected the recruitment of African American teachers (Karpinski, 2006; Wilkerson & Wilson, 2017). In segregated communities in the rural South during the post-Brown era, the decrease of African American school principals was either severely minimized or, in some cases, eliminated the voice of local leaders who usually served as the head of a school or, more often,

as the head of the community (Brown, 2005). The vestiges of this professional extermination still linger in contemporary education to this day (Wilkerson & Wilson, 2017).

In the academic school year of 2003-2004, only nine percent of all school principals were Black (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2007). Recent data points show that the percentage of all principals identifying as Black only increased by two percent (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2021) to eleven percent. It did not stabilize until 1982 when the percentage rose to 7.7, or approximately 3,320 African American principals. Researchers painted a clear picture of how *Brown versus the Board of Education* affected the color and gender of the principalship (Tillman, 2004; Brown, 2005; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013).

Researchers have demonstrated how gender and race have affected the educational system through historical accounts and events, especially in the post-Brown era. These historical accounts have shaped many African American educational leaders' realities (Wilkerson & Wilson, 2017). *Brown versus Board of Education* (1954) desegregation mandates sought to address the racial inequalities for African American students and leaders. Instead, *Brown versus Board of Education* (1954) led to systematic issues of phasing out Black schools and Black leaders and teachers (Khalifa et al., 2013). Black educational leaders' "phasing out" was swift and detrimental to the African American community, schools, and principals (Wilkerson & Wilson, 2017). With these continued issues in the educational system, the continued professional development of principals grounded in the issues of race, gender, and class is of paramount importance.

African Americans in School Leadership

African Americans remain severely underrepresented in the principalship arena. According to the most recent National Center for Educational Statistics (2021) data, African Americans represented only 11.6% of all school principals. The Latino population comprised 13.8%, while Caucasian principals dominated with 67.7%. In addition, most African American principals serve in underperforming schools (Tillman, 2004) and have scarce resources, significant numbers of uncertified teachers, or a larger number of vacancies in critical subject areas (Tillman, 2004). African American principals, given these circumstances, must have leadership preparation programs, workshops, or professional learning to provide theoretical knowledge and practical experiences that will prepare African American principals for these realities (Brown, 2005). Especially during an era of increased accountability, it is imperative to have these professional development opportunities to secure the tenure of African American principals and build their capacities to lead challenging schools. Murtadha and Watts (2005) reflected on the struggles of African American principals and the social injustices they face in leading high-poverty and minority schools. Many African American principals lead schools with significant barriers, including insufficient resources, poverty, and institutionalized inequities. Serving in these conditions, African American principals must learn strategies to leverage a coalition in the absence of power. Black leaders formed fraternal orders and literacy groups and organized church congregations to support collective interests, recognizing that community strengths, not individual abilities, were needed to bring about change for Black and Brown children (Murtadha & Watts, 2005).

A Woman's Place

In the earlier years, White men dominated the principalship. A historical review revealed consistent male domination in many school administration positions. Compared to men, females have historically represented fewer administrators in the United States (Parker, 2015). For the African American race, like gender for women, the principalship position was often unattainable. Rousmaniere (2013) stated, "For women and people of color, the principal is often a position not of us, and not attainable (p. 2)."

Women saw their plight for the principalship change as historical events occurred. For instance, Rousmaniere (2013) reviewed the troubled state of educational leadership in the post-World War II era, a period marked by sharp criticisms of schools' academic failings, waning confidence in public education, and the exile of females from principals' offices in the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), during the middle of the twentieth century, women outnumbered men only at the elementary level of principalship. In South Carolina, women comprise fifty-eight percent of the principals leading schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). From a local context, in Pageford County Schools in South Carolina, sixty-seven percent of the principals at the elementary level are female. In comparison, thirty-three percent are principals at the secondary level. However, men still outnumber women at the secondary and superintendency levels.

Even though women are outnumbered in certain positions by men, females in educational leadership positions tend to bring collaborative and inclusive leadership styles, which can be particularly beneficial in high-needs schools (Brunner et. al., 2015). Female principals often excel in building relationships with students, parents, and the community, fostering a positive

school culture, and improving student engagement (Tallerico, 2013). Female principals possess the skills of empathy and nurturing qualities that can contribute to creating supportive learning environments that are essential for addressing the diverse needs of high-needs school populations (Bjurstrom, 2019).

Despite their contributions, female principals in high-needs schools face unique challenges. Research indicates that gender bias and stereotypes can still hinder women's career progression in educational leadership (Brunner et al., 2015). Additionally, the demands of high-needs schools, such as managing limited resources and addressing academic disparities, can be overwhelming. These challenges may place additional stress on female principals who must navigate the complex terrain of educational leadership while advocating for the needs of their schools and students (Tallerico, 2013).

Women principals in high-needs schools play a significant role in advancing equity in education. Their leadership can inspire students, especially girls, to pursue leadership roles and challenge traditional gender stereotypes (Brunner et al., 2015). Additionally, research suggests that female principals' focus on relationship-building and community engagement can improve student outcomes in high-needs schools (Tallerico, 2013).

In conclusion, female principals in high-needs schools contribute significantly to the educational landscape. Their collaborative leadership styles, empathetic qualities, and commitment to addressing disparities make them valuable assets in improving student outcomes and fostering equitable learning environments (Orfield, 2013; Nelson & Sassi, 2017). However, it is essential to acknowledge their challenges, including gender bias and the unique demands of high-needs schools. Supporting women principals through tailored professional development and

mentorship programs can empower them to overcome these challenges and continue making a positive impact on education and equity.

The Change

The landscape of principalship has changed over the past few decades, reflecting the evolution in federal, state, and local policy (Grissom et al., 2020) and increased responsibilities, most often brought about by increased accountability measures. These changes have been swift and, in some cases, intense for building-level leaders. For instance, the role of the principal has seen changes in test-based accountability and increased emphasis on engagement with instruction. Instead of just analyzing resources or maintaining the building, principals are expected to be more engaged with instruction and teachers' observations and facilitate professional development or training (Rousmaniere, 2013). As a result, principals must shift their thinking and alter their expectations of knowing and doing to increase student achievement and meet the accountability requirements.

For example, the universal adoption of teacher evaluation systems based on multiple performance measures has required a deeper understanding of effective instruction. As a result, the principals' workdays have shifted toward observing instruction and providing feedback. This shift focuses on rubric-based observation metrics and test score growth in their teachers' classrooms (Neumerski et al., 2018). In addition, principals must pay attention to the heightened analysis of student achievement for minorities, special education, multi-language, and low-income students. With all these national, state, and local educational changes, the prevailing questions are Where are the requisite changes for principal support and development? and Who is there to attend to the professional needs of these leaders as they attempt to tackle the

seemingly impossible task of contemporary school leadership? Answering these questions is paramount in developing any educational leader. The answers take on even greater significance with issues of race, gender, or the high-needs designation of schools layered onto the principalship. Examining the intersection therein lies at the heart of this study.

Developing Principals of High-Needs Schools

The national concern over the availability of high-quality principals has been framed by a broad spectrum of educational groups and advocates (Browne-Ferrigno & Knoeppel, 2005; Hess & Kelly, 2005). According to Jackie Gran (2016), forty-one percent of superintendents reported that principals are not well-prepared for the job. At the same time, all states have licensure requirements that purport to identify the capacities and orientations necessary for school leaders. Many cannot define the specificity of the responsibilities and duties of the principals in high-needs schools. For example, in South Carolina, all principals must attend the Principal Induction Program (PIP) for a year. After the PIP, superintendents are left to develop and grow their principals, especially those who lead high-needs schools.

Being a principal of a high-needs school can be a lonely, overwhelming task, and create a sense of isolation in the first year and after that. A 2018 report, “Principal Attrition and Mobility: Results From the 2016-2017 Principal Follow-up Survey,” conducted by the United States Department of Education, stated that nearly one in five schools had a different principal in one year than the previous year. Authors Stephanie Levin and Kathryn Bradley (2019) from the Learning Policy Institute explained that this turnover rate is due to a lack of preparation for the principalship. Since the 2001 NCLB legislation, much research has been done on the lack of

preparation and preparedness of school principals for the changing demands of the job (Grissom et al., 2019; Westberry & Horner, 2022).

Bazor (2021) stated that professional development (PD) is the pillar of equity and quality education. Leaders, like teachers, need authentic development for the everyday challenges of principalship. Barth (2003) noted that PD needs to reflect on the practices occurring in the schools. Westberry and Horner (2022) noted that, like teachers, there is a significant gap between what principals receive in the form of PD and what they hope to receive. Too often, PD is based on a new program or technological tool rather than people and practices (Reeves, 2010). In addition, principals do not like to acknowledge deficiencies in skill due to fear of judgment (Koonce et al., 2019; Westberry, 2020). With this fear of acknowledging the need for support and the lack of quality support, effective PD for principals creates a problematic chasm to fill (Westberry & Horner, 2022). This chasm then directly impacts teachers' learning and student achievement, especially in high-needs schools. Thomas Feller and Seth Brown (2022) stated that developing leaders takes time and ultimately begins with identifying the goal and answering the question, "Who do we want our principals to Be?" Suppose we know our goal and the competencies we want the principals to possess. In that case, we can determine the training, professional development, mentoring, and coaching pieces to develop and grow the principals to lead high-needs schools.

Barnett and O'Mahony (2007) stated that school leaders' development is more involved and incremental. Therefore, the system needs more effective, practical, and efficient PD for modern principals to thrive in today's educational environment. In addition, Mendels and Mitgang (2013) stated that once districts "hire new principals, districts have a continuing

responsibility to promote these principals' growth and success" (p. 24). Therefore, school districts must fill the gaps to create an environment conducive to professional learning for their principals (Westberry & Horner, 2022). However, more effective, helpful, and efficient PD for principals is only one part of the support triad (Wilkerson, 2021) needed to grow and develop leaders of high-needs schools. These leaders also need dedicated mentoring and coaching.

Mentoring Principals

In mentoring principals, the process would include one-on-one support that provides guidance and advice (Westberry, 2021). According to Fullan (2016), mentoring occurs in various formats and is attractive for groups and individuals. By building a system involving mentoring school leaders, especially those who work in challenging schools, we would have a safe place for principals to discuss delicate situations and share successful or unsuccessful strategies. In addition, mentoring would allow principals to connect with veteran principals for advice and support on similar or different situations. For instance, mentoring helps develop new principals with veteran principals' support and guidance (Yirci & Kocabas, 2010).

Mentoring is an excellent combination of theory and practice in principal training. With the assistance of veteran principals, the mentoring process would benefit novice and struggling principals. Daresh (2004) emphasized that a mentor is a teacher, counselor, role model, guide, and wise, experienced person. Meyer and Maboso (2007) stated that a mentor has two roles in mentoring a principal. First, the mentor supplies career development opportunities by coaching and providing guidance on challenging tasks. Second, the mentors offer psychosocial support, such as counseling and role modeling support for mentees. Without a mentor, principals will learn less or nothing about being effective as a principal.

In conclusion, mentoring principals in high-needs schools emerges as a pivotal strategy to address the multifaceted challenges inherent in these educational settings. High-needs schools, characterized by socioeconomic disparities and diverse student needs, demand effective leadership (Orfield, 2013; Nelson & Sassi, 2017). Principals, as central figures in shaping school culture and improving outcomes, face complex challenges that range from achievement gaps to teacher retention (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The critical importance of mentoring is to enhance leadership development, job satisfaction, and, ultimately, student outcomes in high-needs schools. Mentoring equips principals with the skills, confidence, and support necessary to navigate the intricate landscape of these schools (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Pounder, 2012). Moreover, mentoring contributes to greater job satisfaction, reducing the alarming principal turnover rates often observed in these challenging environments (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The positive ripple effect extends to students, as effective principal leadership, bolstered by mentoring, fosters improved achievement, attendance, and behavior (Harris, 2014; Hitt, 2005). However, it is crucial to acknowledge the existing gap in the literature, particularly regarding the specific impact of mentoring in high-needs schools. Further research is needed to explore and refine mentoring strategies tailored to these unique settings. The insights gained from this study emphasize how principals could transform their practices with the potential of mentoring.

Coaching to Build the Capacity of Principals

Now more than ever, principals need coaching to develop and grow. Principals, especially in high-needs schools, are under scrutiny like never before. Society places higher expectations on principals to be instructional leaders to improve student learning and academic achievement (Hong, 2012; Westberry, 2020). Coaching works to provide job-related skills

through productive feedback (Westberry, 2021). The Center for Educational Leadership (2013) stated that principals must blend their energy, knowledge, and professional skills to collaborate with and motivate others to transform our schools, especially in our most challenging schools. Coaching involves a professional relationship and a deliberate personalized process to provide leaders with valid, objective information to make choices based on that information (Reiss, 2007).

For principals, this means there is a continuous learning process. The coaching process includes gaining information about the changes in their schools, the choices and decisions before them, and the types of commitments necessary for those choices or decisions (Ortiz, 2002). Coaching focuses on clarifying professional goals and the actions needed to achieve them. Coaching aims to help individuals change the organization and the principal's future (Bloom et al., 2005; Killion, 2002).

Coaching offers school leaders opportunities to learn and improve their craft by building a trusting relationship and using collaboration, instruction, facilitation, reaction, and transformational strategies (Bloom et al., 2003). The ultimate goal of leadership coaching is to help principals and district leaders become thoughtful, courageous leaders capable of creating and sustaining systemic processes that lead to increased student achievement (Killion, 2002; Reiss, 2007). With coaching, principals can take responsible risks and improve their knowledge and skillset to lead a school or a challenging school.

In summary, coaching has emerged as a critical component, particularly in the context of principals of high-needs schools. High-needs schools, often grappling with socioeconomic disparities, diverse student populations, and resource constraints, require skilled and adaptable

leadership to address their unique challenges (Orfield, 2013; Nelson & Sassi, 2017). Principals who lead these schools face the daunting task of improving student outcomes, managing staff, and fostering a positive school culture (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The profound significance of using coaching as a mechanism for enhancing and building principal leadership capacity, promoting job satisfaction, and ultimately impacting student achievement in high-needs schools. Coaching equips principals with the personalized support and guidance needed to navigate the complex and ever-evolving educational landscape, especially in high-needs schools (Bjurstrom, 2019; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). It empowers them with the skills, confidence, and tools to effect change, build strong teams, and foster student success. Moreover, coaching contributes to greater job satisfaction among principals, which is a critical factor in retaining effective leaders in high-needs schools (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do superintendents or their designees develop and grow principals to lead high-needs schools?
2. How are superintendents or their designees currently developing and growing principals to lead high-needs schools?
3. How can we identify a coherent framework to grow and develop principals to lead high-needs schools?

Rationale for Research

As educational reform throughout the nation continues, educational leaders play a significant role in the reform's success (Salazar, 2018). The document, *The Professional*

Development Needs of Rural High School Principals: A Seven-state Study (Salazar, 2018), stated that for school reform efforts to be successful, strong leadership must prevail. With the increased accountability from the state and federal entities pushing for school reform, researchers have established a link between school leadership and the principal's abilities to elicit school success. School leadership can positively impact school outcomes, including student achievement. Increasing student achievement places the principal at the center of the school improvement efforts, especially for those principals leading high-needs schools. For this reason, leaders and policymakers have focused on the notion that principals lack the necessary knowledge and skills to be effective instructional leaders (Fink & Silverman, 2014). Statistically, principals are ten or more years removed from their certification—hence, ongoing professional development, mentoring, and coaching for principals, especially those leading high-needs schools.

Today, school principals in high-needs schools need to grow and learn throughout their careers to adapt to the challenging needs of teachers and students (Rowland, 2017). School leaders must receive professional development aimed at helping them be more effective, knowledgeable, and qualified to lead continuous improvement, especially in high-needs schools (Rowland, 2017).

This dissertation in practice (DiP) examined how school leaders in high-needs schools can be systematically grown and developed to elicit improved academic outcomes within the schools they lead. The data from this study will provide school districts with a model of coaching and mentoring for leaders of high-needs schools capable of supporting their quest for school improvement. In particular, the results of the study will provide school districts with valuable information on developing school principals in high-needs schools and those leaders who need

further support to increase student achievement. The linchpin of this study rests upon infusing effective professional development into the school improvement process.

Like teachers, school leaders need ongoing professional development to build their capacity to improve performance and effectiveness (Tschannen-Moran & Chen, 2014; Westberry & Hornor, 2022). These school leaders must receive professional development aimed at assisting them to be more effective, knowledgeable, and qualified to lead and facilitate continuous improvement for their schools. According to Visone (2018, pg. 162), “If we could do only one thing to build school capacity, we would develop a cadre of school leaders who understand the challenges of school improvement.”

Reflexivity and Positionality Statement

As a scholar-practitioner, I came to my DiP as a former principal leading three high-needs schools. Throughout my career, I have spent seventy-five percent of my leadership career working in schools labeled as high-needs, high-poverty, and high-minority schools. While I am now an Executive Director within my school district, I come to this research with experience as a leader in turning around high-needs schools. For instance, under my leadership, one of the high-needs schools was the first and only secondary school to earn Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind legislation. The school went from an F rating to a C in three years, preventing the state department from taking over the school. Then, I was moved to a larger middle school operating at a D rating and moved the school to a high B and achieved becoming the first Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) certified middle school in the nation.

Finally, I transformed an early college school from a graduation rate of 70% to 92.5%. Because of my history of leading successful school change initiatives, I can empathize and sympathize with the principals who lead the target schools. This allows me to have those critical conversations about change and leadership through mentoring, coaching, and professional development. In conducting this research, I was careful not to allow certain relationships to cloud my judgment of their responses or experiences. I did this by having a thought partner within the field. I used my failings and successful experiences to mentor, coach, and provide resources to the focus group of eight principals by providing feedback and asking questions. As an employee of the district, I can access data, resources, and support that an outsider might not be able to.

In my position as Executive Director of School Transformation, multiple school leaders have shared that they often cannot receive support from the District Office. The experiences and responses from these participants provided depth and value as I attempted to address the problem of practice and the research questions that undergirded this study. Throughout the process, I remained aware of my bias and perceptions and did not allow them to interfere with the interviews to guide their thinking and decision-making. When analyzing the data, I did not let my experiences blind me from themes that revealed themselves in interviews by using the thought partner and looking at the facts. In this study, I analyzed and devised a support plan for principals of high-needs schools. This plan will allow each administrator's support system to build the necessary skill sets to lead their schools. According to Bandura (2006), mentoring, coaching, and professional development will increase their authentic experiences and improve their leadership abilities.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

A wide range of research designs, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks have been utilized to investigate the effectiveness of K-12 professional development. However, few research studies or articles have focused on effective principal professional development (Westberry & Hornor, 2022). The complexity of instructional leadership, especially in high-needs schools, requires a diverse array of influential factors as well as the variables of working in combination with mandates and strategic professional development of the research strategy and design (Westberry & Horton, 2022; Leavy, 2017; Mertens, 2015).

Research is the systematic investigation into and the study of materials and sources to establish facts that allow new conclusions to be reached (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used a practical action research approach where the results can be immediately used for improving the development of principals who lead high-needs schools. This type of design uses qualitative data collected and analyzed to understand the problem of practice better and answer the research question of how school districts systematically develop principals who lead high-needs schools (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bauer & Brazer, 2012). The practical action research approach is informed by improvement science. Improvement Science guided me to analyze continuous improvement and to reconceptualize improvement by centering on equity and justice for these school leaders and their development (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

The support, coaching, and mentoring currently employed in the Pageford School District were examined to answer the research questions. Professional development is provided to

principals in high-needs schools to increase their knowledge and ability as administrators. I provided professional development through a Communities of Practice (CoP) approach defined by Wenger (2011). Wenger (2011) described the CoP as a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. This professional development engaged the principals directly with the material and each other. The meeting structure had planned interactions with the principals collaborating and receiving academic feedback (Westberry & Horner, 2022).

The collection of qualitative data assisted in analyzing the support necessary to improve the skill set of the principal. I interviewed each participant about their perceptions of the support needed, wanted, or given to grow the principals. Strauss and Corbin (2015) asserted that utilizing qualitative research methodology is particularly powerful in describing the meaning of research participants and comparing their lived experiences. This strategy allowed each principal of the high-needs schools to reflect on their own experiences, and professional development needs to be collected and compared to the other participants in this dissertation in practice (Westberry & Hornor, 2022; Saldana & Omasta, 2018). I used a small sample size of principals for this dissertation in practice. According to Percy et al. (2015), a small research sample might provide valuable insight and information for this DiP.

Site Selection

The site selection for the DiP were schools identified as high needs by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE), which resided within the Pageford School District. Once identified by the SCDOE, these schools were grouped by the Pageford School District and identified as Tier Three Schools. The school district identified these as Tier Three schools by

analyzing student achievement. Because of their achievement for third-grade students, two schools receive assistance from the South Carolina State Department and are identified as Palmetto Reading Schools. The Pageford School District enhanced the support received from the state by assigning additional Literacy and Numeracy Coaches to the schools. In addition, both schools have interventionists and literacy teachers to assist with improving the reading scores.

All eight principals were interviewed to answer the research questions and examine the coaching and mentoring support given by the school district. I studied each principal's areas of reinforcement and refinement as identified by the principal evaluation instrument employed by the state of South Carolina called the Program Assisting, Developing, and Evaluating Principal Performance Standards (PADEPP). The PADEPP system has nine standards: Vision, Instructional Leadership, Effective Management, Climate, School-Community Relations, Ethical Behavior, Interpersonal Skills, Staff Development, and Professional Development. Principals are evaluated two times a year and granted a final rating during their summative evaluation period. A principal is assigned to reinforce or refine areas during this summative evaluation period. Utilizing these standards and the reinforcement and refinement from the principal's summative evaluation, I was able to determine areas of support provided to the participants.

Participants included the principals of Tier Three schools identified by the Pageford School District. These schools range from rural to urban. Participation was optional and confidential—the names of the principal or the school's name were anonymous to preserve

confidentiality by using pseudonyms. Each participant completed the consent form to participate in the DiP (Appendix A).

Principal Interview Protocol

Newcomer et al. (2015) suggested that the open-ended nature of interviews provides the most opportunities for respondents to comment and give insight on specific events (Newcomer et al., 2015). Therefore, the survey questions (Appendix B) allowed the participants to offer their perspectives on the district's systems or structures (financial, instructional, human resource, and student services) in leading high-needs schools. Zoom conferencing recorded all interviews so that transcriptions were fully available. This dissertation in practice included interviews with sitting principals of tier three schools in the Pageford School District. These interviews describe how Pageford School District systematically develops and grows principals who lead high-needs schools.

Data Analysis

Data analysis within qualitative research consists of systematically analyzing and searching interview transcripts or observations to conclude or interpret the data through coding. This process involves the practitioner making sense of the data and moving deeper into interpretations to derive a more significant meaning (Creswell, 2018).

After completing the interviews, I engaged in multiple stages of coding, classifying, and clustering words to ensure I understood developing themes, categories, and patterns about how to support principals who lead high-needs schools. Whether it is a CoP, ongoing professional development, coaching, or mentoring, I was able to develop a framework to develop instructional leaders for high-needs schools (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I continued to analyze and revisit the

data to develop themes that answered the overarching research questions. Answering these questions allowed insight into how to develop and provide effective professional development for principals leading high-needs schools.

Plan-Do-Study-Act, PDSA Model

PDSA cycles are iterative mini-experiments during which educators articulate improvement changes, carry out the change, study the results, and decide how to proceed, such as adopting, adapting, or abandoning the change (Provost & Bennett, 2015). The overall purpose of running PDSA cycles during the testing phase is to conduct an improvement investigation; during this investigation, educators learn quickly and affordably which interventions work and, later, how to adaptively integrate them to attain quality outcomes reliably scale (Bryk et al., 2015).

Plan. During the “Plan” phase, the goals are to define how the change will occur and determine how to execute the necessary change by collecting data and describing the who, what, and where of the test (Bryk et al., 2017). In conducting this dissertation in practice, I administered a needs assessment on and with the principals. The data emanating from the needs assessment allowed this researcher to create a systematic approach to enhancing the leadership skills needed by the principals of these high-needs schools. By focusing on the essential needs, as stated by study participants, this study can be customized to face the changing and challenging demands of being a principal in high-needs schools. The needs assessment addressed instruction, data-driven staff development, staff culture, managing instructional teams, and time management and was holistically focused on improving student achievement. These areas of focus, also called improvement “levers” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018), may accelerate leadership capacity and

student achievement. Each principal selected two levers they wanted to improve upon, thereby increasing their leadership capacity (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). After collecting the data, I analyzed the principals' responses and grouped them by the levers they identified as growth areas. This allowed me to create a CoP plan called *Learning and Growing Leaders* (LGL). During the LGL segments, I had each principal bring an artifact or evidence about the lever identified as a need. I looked for similarities and differences between the principals to build their leadership toolbox and give them strategies to implement. The *Learning and Growing Leaders* sessions occurred every three weeks at the principal's school. This allowed principals to gather the evidence to present and receive peer academic feedback for a follow-up session. *Learning and Growing Leaders* assisted each participant in building their leadership capacity. Mader (2016) stated, "Like teacher development, principals need to have a very focused approach to training that is going to set the principal up for the greatest success" (p. 2).

Do. The "Do" phase of the PDSA cycle required me to implement changes proposed in the Plan phase while collecting data to see if there was a change and how practical the difference was with the school leaders (Bryk et al., 2017). First, I provided the CoP, *Learning and Growing Leaders*, where principals got to raise questions concerning their identified needs, visit each other's schools to observe, and give peer feedback. A growing evidence-based literature supports the value of peer feedback as a positive professional learning activity that enhances confidence, builds collegial relationships, and supports reflective practice (Wingrove et al., 2015). Second, I had the principals implement the strategy to build their leadership capacity concerning the lever identified within the need's assessment responses. Third, principals brought in an artifact addressing the levers and received feedback to move to the next critical action steps to improve

their behaviors and build their leadership capacity. According to Grissom et al. (2021), the four main behaviors are (1) engaging in instructional-focused interactions with teachers; (2) building a productive school climate; (3) facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities, and (4) managing personnel and resources strategically. Finally, I monitored the change by announcing visits with the peer participants to see how the principals intentionally changed their behaviors in implementing the strategy or system within their schools. Creating a safe space for each principal to discuss strategies and briefly describe what was happening with each of them as a school leader allowed them to learn from each other and let them know that even at the top, “you are not alone.”

Study. The “Study” phase of the PDSA cycle required me to record results from the Power Hour sessions and the anecdotal evidence during networking opportunities given to the school leaders; I performed data analysis based on the observations, reflections, similarities, and differences of each to the school leaders (Bryk et al., 2017). In addition, I looked for unintended consequences recognizing the surprises, successes, and failures of the Power Hour sessions, and studied the dynamics of the school leaders within the network and how well we worked together to solve problems and issues we may encounter.

Act. The “Act” phase of the PDSA cycle is the final phase. In this phase, I decided on the next steps in the cycle. For example, suppose the results were not the desired outcome for the principals. In that case, I implemented a new critical action, planning and visiting other school principals within the district. First, I connected the principal struggling with the lever to a principal who was excelling with the lever. Participants learned how to respond to different points of view and draw on the talents of group members to complete the challenges (Duke,

2014). Next, I described any modifications or necessary adjustments to the *Learning and Growing Leaders* or repeated the PDSA cycle by switching or regrouping the principals. The data decided whether I switched or regrouped the principals for the *Learning and Growing Leaders* (Bryk et al., 2017). Finally, if I was still not seeing a significant change, I changed the *Learning and Growing Leaders* for the school leaders. Through this PDSA cycle, I was able to create a series of *Learning and Growing Leaders* sessions using the levers to implement with principals to build their leadership capacity to lead high-needs schools. Peter Early (2020) purported that leader development is mainly about the development of the individual and only secondarily about the development of the role. The more the principals learned about themselves through these CoPs, the better they were able to perform in their role as principals of a high-needs school.

Conclusion

In this era of accountability, school district leaders must be strategic in providing coaching, mentoring, and professional development experiences for all leaders, especially those who lead high-poverty and high-minority schools. With six hundred and fifty schools in South Carolina deemed as a high minority and high poverty, it is time for school districts to strategically assist these leaders by giving them the support they need to succeed. Without the efforts of highly effective and confident leaders to raise student achievement, the cycle of high-needs schools will continue. It will not change the outcomes for students or the fundamental academic mission of the school system (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

In this chapter, I report the findings of my data collection and analysis to answer my research questions: “How do superintendents or their designees develop and grow principals to lead high-needs schools? How are superintendents or their designees currently developing and growing principals to lead high-needs schools? How can we identify a coherent framework to grow and develop principals to lead high-needs schools?” Collecting qualitative data was a compelling and thorough process for answering my research questions. As Crewell stated, “the process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data.” It involves preparing data for analysis, conducting different analyses, and interpreting the data. Through this process, I discovered multiple themes during the qualitative data analysis. I describe and discuss each one with supporting data. In the following sections, the data shows the results of the “Study” phase of my PDSA cycle.

My analysis supports and provides details to support the systematic professional development around the seven levers in *Leverage Leadership 2.0*. First, I present the qualitative data that surfaced from analyzing and coding surveys and interviews with the principals from conducting the intervention of community of practice and “bite-sized” professional development on the lever observation and feedback that aligns with lesson planning. Then, I share the tights and loose of the cycle observation and feedback and how I adjusted it to meet the needs of the principals. Next, I will expound on the sisterhood that was uncovered through the Community of Practice (CoP), setting the seed of trust, nurturing the sisterhood, and the legacy of the sisterhood. Finally, I will connect the implications of race and gender to the modern times within

Pageford School District and the principals who are serving as leaders of these high-needs schools versus those who do not serve in high-needs schools.

Qualitative Findings

Principals in the Pageford School District who participated in this study answered various questions through interviews and surveys to generate insight regarding the three research questions: How do superintendents or their designees develop and grow principals to lead high-needs schools? How are superintendents or their designees currently developing and growing principals to lead high-needs schools? How can we identify a coherent framework to grow and develop principals to lead high-needs schools?

All participants in this research study discussed professional development to be relevant, ongoing, and concise. Surprisingly, despite the differences in years of experience, race, and ethnicity, the participants' responses were similar. Participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 3.1, illustrating the participant pseudonyms, years of principal experience, years serving at a high-needs school, gender, race, and school level. The number of participants changed due to one principal being transferred out of the portfolio and the second one being hired, a male, who did not fit the initial profile of the participants serving in this study. Table 3.2 represents the breakdown of the demographics of each school and the total number of students being served.

Table 3.1*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Participants (n=6)	Principal Experience	Years at High-Needs	Race	School Level
Grace	1	6	Caucasian	Elementary
Elisa	5	10	Caucasian	Elementary
Celest	15	15	African American	Elementary
Katherine	3	12	African American	Middle School
Brooklyn	7	3	African American	Middle School
Theresa	8	8	African American	Elementary

Table 3.2*Demographics of Schools, Power School, 11/27/23*

Leader	Total	Asian	Black	Latinx	Native American	Two/More	Pacific Islander	White
Grace	405	0	292	68	1	29	0	15
Elisa	429	0	190	171	0	32	0	36
Celest	459	8	178	128	0	59	0	86
Kathrine	227	0	166	31	0	15	0	15
Brooklyn	415	7	209	54	0	26	0	119
Theresa	322	0	247	42	1	12	1	19
Totals:	2257	15	1282	494	2	173	1	290

Some interesting facts can be determined from Tables 3.1 and 3.2. First, you can see that most of the students are black and brown, and they are the highest number in Pageford School District compared to the other schools. Second, the schools are increasing the number of Latinx

students versus the past years. Finally, in the last three years, White students have left several of the schools and registered close to single digits. Furthermore, in analyzing the principalships of these schools in the last three years, fifty percent of the principals are new to the buildings they are leading. In the past five years, sixty-seven percent of principals are new to the buildings they are leading. Digging deeper within the analysis of the principalships, fifty percent of the principals replaced either a Caucasian female or male principal, while the others replaced an African American female or male principal. Grace, Brooklyn, and Katherine schools have seen three different principals in the last six years, while Celest and Theresa have been the stable force at their schools. Elisa's school has only had two principals in the last six years. Seeing the revolving door for these high-needs schools is a testament to how difficult it is to have a principal at a high-needs school and the importance of identifying a coherent framework to develop and grow leaders. As stated by Theresa, an eight-year veteran,

“I believe the specific professional development needs of principals who lead high-needs schools can vary depending on various factors such as school demographics, individual experiences, strengths, and areas of growth needed for the principal.”

Even though there were several salient themes analyzed from the qualitative data regarding principals' professional development to grow and develop them to lead high-needs schools, after coding and analyzing the surveys and interviews, four key factors emerged that were central to growing and developing principals to lead high-needs schools: learner-centric approach (Joshi et al., 2022), continuous and ongoing professional development, alignment with school initiatives and needs, and a framework with tights and loose. However, there was one essential theme that almost escaped me but was uncovered by the women through the Community of Practice (CoP), and that was establishing a sisterhood. A sisterhood built on trust,

communication, collaboration, and holding each other accountable. The following sections elaborate on the qualitative data gained relating to each theme to provide insight into how to develop and grow principals to lead high-needs schools.

Learner-Centric Approach

The education landscape continually evolves, driven by technological advancements, pedagogical shifts, and societal changes. The importance of professional development for educators cannot be overstated within this dynamic environment. However, not all forms of professional development yield the desired outcomes. One approach that has consistently emerged as impactful is the learner-centric approach. This was a dominant theme that emerged from the responses, which was the need for a learner-centric approach to professional development that will grow and develop principals to lead high-needs schools. This approach emphasizes the learners' needs, experiences, and contexts, ensuring the training is tailored and relevant (Joshi et al., 2022).

“Learning opportunities that engage the learner and are relevant,” Chelsee stated, underscoring the importance of engagement in learning. A learner-centric approach is not about passive content delivery but about creating an environment where educators actively ask questions, share experiences, and apply what they have learned. At its core, the learner-centric approach places the learner, the principal of a high-needs school, at the center of the learning process. Educators are active participants, rather than passively receiving information, driving their learning journey. This is consistent with all the participants in that they desire professional development that is practical versus theoretical. This is represented by the comments of some of the principals below:

Theresa, with eight years of experience, stated, “Effective professional development: 1) is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; 2) focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; 3) is connected to other school initiatives and builds strong working relationships among teachers; 4) must be consistent and provide time for staff learning, engage staff in learning activities that are a direct reflection of their school improvement plan, and 5) identifies rigorous learning objectives and expected outcomes.”

Elise, a fifth-year principal, said, “We need some time to collaborate at the principals' meetings, but it cannot be forced; somehow, it must be authentic, practical, and productive, and you leave feeling successful. I feel like the district needs a long-range plan to stay ahead.”

In her third year as principal, Katerine stated, “Learning opportunities that engage the learner in supportive, job-embedded, and instructional-focused content from an expert on the topic. Yes, it needs to be relevant and practical. Even though you gave us “homework during professional development,” the assignment was aligned with our work.

In her seventh year as a principal, but only third year at a high-needs school, Brooklyn responded, “It has an immediate impact on my needs and practical applications as a principal. I mean, it should be aligned with my needs, but also the school’s needs. I need to be able to process and use the professional development in a practical manner and with my instructional team.

These responses highlight the multifaceted nature of a learner-centric approach. It is not just about the content but also about the delivery, ensuring that it is intensive, relevant, and connected to real-world teaching practices. In addition, professional development for high-needs leaders should be active and assist them in being practitioners. As Chelsea, the veteran principal of the community of practice, stated, “Professional development needs to be catered to the needs of the leader, engaging and relevant.”

The learner-centric approach is not just a pedagogical strategy but a philosophy. It recognizes each educator's unique perspectives, challenges, and aspirations, offering a tailored learning journey that echoes individual needs (Joshi et al., 2022). In addition, the learner-centric approach uses the principal’s knowledge and past experiences with professional development to awaken the learning and transcend it to the teachers and students. As the educational landscape

shifts, the learner-centric approach stands out, guiding the way toward more impactful, meaningful, and transformative professional development through peer-reviewing, debating topics, and role-play scenarios. The principals saw this approach's benefits as improved retention and application and increased motivation. When leaders exhibit these three traits, they will transfer the knowledge to their leaders, build teacher capacity, and invest in their professional development and the teachers and staff (Joshi et al., 2022).

In summary, a learner-centric approach encourages collaboration among the principals who lead high-needs schools. It empowers principals to actively participate in their learning journey while enhancing their motivation and sense of ownership. By embracing this approach, principals can transform their schools into places of learning and growth, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes.

Embracing Continuous and Ongoing Process

Another predominant theme was the need for professional development to be a continuous and ongoing process. Ongoing and continuous professional development refers to the process of continuously enhancing your knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout your career. It is a deliberate and proactive approach to learning and self-improvement that helps individuals stay current in their field, adapt to changes, and achieve their career goals. To engage in ongoing and continuous professional development effectively, individuals should set clear goals, create a personalized development plan, and regularly evaluate their progress. It is important to choose ongoing and continuous activities that align with the principals' career aspirations and the needs of being a principal of a high-needs school. Additionally, seeking feedback from mentors or

supervisors can help individuals identify areas for improvement and tailor their ongoing and continuous professional development efforts accordingly.

The world of education is dynamic, and as it evolves, so must the training provided to educators. In a rapidly changing educational landscape, the static models of yesteryears no longer suffice. The challenges, technologies, methodologies, and student demographics are in a state of flux, necessitating educators to be in a perpetual state of learning. Four out of six principals believed in the “Continuous and Ongoing Process,” illustrating its importance, components, implications, and the paradigm shift it represents in the realm of education:

Theresa, an eight-year veteran, stated, “It should be designed to support continuous learning, growth, and improvement in my career.” Elisa, a fifth-year principal, echoed similar sentiments, “Effective professional development is a structured and ongoing process that helps educators improve their skills, knowledge, and teaching practices.” While Katherine, a third-year principal, stated, “Professional development should be continuous for improvement.” Finally, Chelsea, a fifteenth-year veteran, said, “Professional development must be continuous and ongoing and not a one-and-done training or workshop model.”

Historically, professional development was often viewed as an episodic event, a periodic workshop, or a once-a-year seminar (Westberry, 2020). However, as the dynamism of the educational environment became evident, it became clear that an irregular approach was insufficient. The seeds of continuous learning were sown from this realization. As Theresa, an eight-year veteran, highlighted, “Effective professional development is a structured, ongoing process aligned with the continuous improvement models.” It was evident that continuity is preferable and imperative for principals who lead high-needs schools. Elisa, a fifth-year

principal, added, “It is essential for the continuous growth and development of teachers, administrators, and other school staff in high-needs schools.” This approach promotes the ethos of lifelong learning. Educators are not just learners during formal training sessions but are encouraged to adopt a learning and growth mindset. As an acting first-year principal, Gracie stated, “Continuous learning ensures that educators are always equipped with the latest strategies, tools, and methodologies.” From these statements, the principals all understand and know that continuous and ongoing professional development promotes collaborative learning, where the principals can learn from each other's experiences, perspectives, and insights on leading a high-needs school. Chelsee, the fifteenth-year veteran, reiterated:

So again, collaborative learning helps because it puts me in a space with people who are dealing with similar situations. And so, a lot of synergy happens. It lightens the load just a little bit. Things that are just as simple as I already got a letter for that. Oh, I already got a form for that. You know, we do things like that all the time. If I create a letter or a form, I share it.

The continuous and ongoing professional development process for leaders of high-needs schools is more than just a theme; it is a clear call for a fundamental shift in how we approach principal training. In an era where change is the only constant, continuous learning emerges as a strategy and survival skill for principals in high-needs schools. It ensures that principals are not just reactive but proactive, not just learners but leaders, shaping the future of education with confidence, competence, and conviction. In the end, ongoing and continuous professional development is a crucial aspect of maintaining a successful and fulfilling career in today's rapidly changing world. It is a commitment to growth and improvement that can lead to long-term success and personal satisfaction.

Aligning with the Needs of the School and Principal

In the vast and intricate tapestry of education, each thread, be it curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, or administrative decisions, is interwoven, creating a cohesive narrative. Within this narrative, the alignment of professional development emerges as a pivotal thread. However, its true impact is realized only when it is intricately aligned with the broader initiatives and needs of schools. This section delves into the theme of alignment in professional development, clarifying its significance, nuances, and broader implications for the educational landscape.

Listening to the principals, the alignment of professional development echoed loudly and clearly. When viewed in isolation, professional development is like an unassembled jigsaw puzzle. Each piece holds value, but the bigger picture remains elusive. The significance of ensuring that professional development is in sync with the overarching goals, strategies, and needs of the school and its educators is a necessity. Alignment acts as the guiding hand, assembling these pieces in congruence with the broader vision and needs of the school. As the acting first-year principal, Gracie, echoed, “Learning aligned to the school and teacher needs.” Alignment ensures that professional development is not an isolated endeavor but a synchronized effort. Beyond content, alignment extends to integrating professional development into the school’s strategic initiatives. As highlighted, professional development should be connected to other school initiatives, not just the school districts. This ensures that training sessions are not sporadic events but integral parts of the school's strategic roadmap. The third-year principal, Katherine, expressed this sentiment:

The monthly professional development portfolio meetings are aligned with the needs of these schools. This allows us to work together in unison with professional development

instead of the training being out of sync, all over the place, or having nothing to do with what we have going on at our schools.

When professional development aligns seamlessly with school initiatives and needs, the benefits are multiple, as Elisa, a fifth-year principal, and Theresa, an eight-year principal, similarly expressed this opinion:

Professional development to grow and develop principals of high-needs schools should be relevant and aligned to the school's specific needs and goals. Additionally, I believe it is important that others provide professional development with experiences and a track record of success in high-needs schools.

Training sessions become more impactful as principals of high-needs schools can readily relate to and apply what they have learned. Alignment for these principals who lead high-needs schools ensures that all stakeholders work towards a unified vision, enhancing cohesion and synergy. Allowing professional development to align with the school and principal's needs allows the leader to focus on the essentials for leading and transforming the high-needs school.

Alignment in professional development is not just a strategic decision; it is a philosophical commitment to ensuring that every training session, every workshop, and every seminar resonates deeply with the heartbeat or initiatives of the school. It is about recognizing that in the ecosystem of education, every initiative, every decision, and every effort is interconnected, especially for principals who lead high-needs schools. Furthermore, for the system to thrive, these connections must be nurtured, celebrated, and, most importantly, aligned to grow and develop the principals of high-needs schools. True alignment is achieved when all stakeholders, from school leaders and teachers to parents and students, collaborate in the professional development process and link opportunities to learn. This ensures that multiple perspectives are considered, leading to a more holistic and inclusive approach. With alignment,

resources, be it time, funds, or manpower, are optimized, ensuring that professional development initiatives offer maximum value for principals who lead high-needs schools. Alignment of professional development is crucial for these leaders because they do not have the time to waste on nonessential initiatives for their schools, especially for the academic needs and growth of their students.

The alignment of professional development for principals who lead high-needs schools is a paradigm shift for superintendents and their designees. With this shift, superintendents and their designees must include data-driven decision training for their principals to leverage data and tailor the professional development for principals and their high-needs schools. Lastly, superintendents and their designees must be able to align the adaptations of professional development for the principals and the high-needs schools they serve.

Cadence for Growth and Development

In the realm of educational oversight, the role of instructional leadership is pivotal, especially in high-needs schools. During this research, I identified a coherent framework to build the capacity of the participants according to the survey on the seven levers of *Leverage Leadership 2.0*. All participants selected observation and feedback to grow and develop not only their capacity but also their instructional leadership team. First, each participant created a schedule with their leadership teams with their focus (see Appendix E for an example). Next, I identified Tights & Loose for observations and feedback (see Appendix F). According to Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (2018), each leader was tasked with meticulously planning a weekly observation schedule, ensuring a balance between rigor and flexibility. The observations are not random but purposeful, with each week bearing a specific instructional focus. This intentionality

in planning underscores the commitment to targeted instructional improvement and responsiveness to evolving educational needs and practices for the teachers. However, three weeks into the first cycle, some of the leaders were having a difficult time following the schedule or observing classrooms. They were adamant about the time and being able to conduct the required visits, the observations. Before beginning the next cycle, I had the participants read a short excerpt from Justin Baeder's (2018), *Now We're Talking! 21 Days to High-Performance Instructional Leadership*. While time is always scarce, it is possible for every leader, every day, to devote time to the core work of instructional leadership, getting into the classrooms. So, I adjusted the tight and loose from three minimum to five maximum a week to observe three minimum to five maximum a day, but for a shorter period on the focus area, fifteen minutes. This allowed each participant and their leadership team to schedule and observe more classrooms and understand the instructional practices happening within their buildings. In addition, this practice of a shorter period assisted the principals in obtaining their goal and developing a consistent habit of getting into the classrooms. It was interesting to hear the principals speak about the coherent framework and how they grew:

Elisa, a fifth-year principal, described her thoughts, "So I think it's grown me and as a leader in the same way that I'm trying to grow my staff, especially this year, in regard to the follow-up and accountability, because I think that so often we go and we hear a presentation, or we get told, like, you know, this is what you need to take back to your school and do. But no one follows up with it. And so, having that cycle where you know this person will be coming back to check on you. This person wants to see your evidence. You know all of that, like. It keeps it to your forefront in a job where it's so easy for things just to get pushed down and down and down on your to-do list."

Brooklyn, a seven-year principal, noted that the observation and feedback schedule "Has an immediate impact on my needs and practical applications. It has allowed me to support my staff and build my instructional team."

Katherine, a third-year principal, also noted that the observation and feedback, tight and loose, “provides a continuous cycle of improvement for our building. Also, it aligns with our ninety-day plan addressing tier-one instruction.”

Theresa, an eighth-year principal, asserted, “The framework has assisted me to grow and develop as a leader. Having the opportunity to learn and grow alongside colleagues with like needs has been valuable.”

Chelsee, the veteran principal of the group, asserted, “It grows and develops me as a leader because it allows me to build the capacity of the team that I'm leading. So, for example, in my leadership meeting just today with my coaches, I explained to them how and why we use the data from the walkthrough to determine how to support teachers in Plc. much like a teacher would do a small group.”

In addition, each principal had to reflect on the tight and loose reflection form with their leadership team (see Appendix G). Through reflection, the principals and their leadership teams could analyze the observation data, trends, and patterns, have instructional conversations, and determine which teachers required a coaching cycle or one-on-one coaching on the focus for the week. Some principals stated the following about the coherent framework and the cycles:

Grace, an acting first-year principal, said, “After the cycles, I feel like I have the skills to assist teachers and discuss instruction. If I wanted to move up to that next level, I know I have the skills to do so. Then, I am starting to learn those skills and have that experience to be able to jump into the position.”

Chelsee, a veteran principal, reflected: “So again, that alignment is clear, being concise. I am very system-based, anyway. So, that just, you know, matched, you know, because a lot of times when people do not know what to do. Then they make it up. So, if you know, you know exactly, I mean, really like they do. Moreover, it is like, who told you to do that, you know, you know, seriously it, you know, it just provides structure and clarity. You know, like I said, I cannot express enough because, you know, I have done this for a long time. and I tell the other principals that are in our portfolio because they are much younger in the principalship than I am. How fortunate they are to have this because I did not have this when I was starting off. You know, these are things I had to figure out myself. Furthermore, now you can have this support, this help, this guidance. It can. You know, help you prevent, you know. It saves time. you know so. but I know they do not. They cannot understand it because they do not know what it is like not to have it.”

Through this practice of shorter visits and strategically planning the time with the instructional leadership team, the principals could visit classrooms daily and see improvements within the instructional practices in their buildings. In addition, this practice turned into a habit for principals and their instructional leadership teams and led them to have deep conversations about the teachers' practices in their building versus surface level. By performing the cycles, the principals could learn more about their teachers' thinking and the why behind their instructional practices and, in real-time, make informed decisions about the instructional framework for math and reading. Furthermore, this practice assisted each principal in fostering dialogue with teachers, having evidence-based conversations to determine the teachers' goals, areas of reinforcement, and refinement to increase understanding around the instructional practices. Lastly, the cycle of shorter observations improves professional practices, reduces stress, and increases student achievement. More importantly, the cycles demonstrated to each principal that they must do what they must to run and improve the school as a learning organization— basically, the practice of making and implementing operational and improvement decisions (Baeder, 2018).

Participation within a Community of Practice

Communities of practice (CoP), defined by Wenger (2011), have recently gained significant attention as a valuable framework for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and learning within organizations. Communities of Practice are informal groups of individuals who come together to share their expertise, experiences, and insights. The structure and intent of the meetings and planned interactions of the principals of high-needs schools constituted that this group of principals was indeed a CoP. Most of the principals expressed the need and the joy of

participating in the CoP. They noted how they created a bond or a sisterhood leading high-needs schools. They saw this as an opportunity to collaborate on similar needs for their schools and a safe space to discuss continuous improvement. This allowed the principals to address learning gaps and problem-solve through ongoing professional development learning pathways instead of conferences or additional graduate courses.

Theresa, an eighth-year principal, expressed her thoughts about the CoP: “I like the portfolio aspect of the framework. It allows me to talk, plan, and learn alongside other principals. Collaboration is pivotal in helping to share best practices.”

Grace, first-year acting principal, noted: “Through those conversations with colleagues, you learn you are not alone and have someone to discuss if you are willing to sit and provide feedback.”

When asked about the types of professional development needed for principals to lead high-needs schools, most of the participants highlighted the need for coaching and mentoring strategies from a person with experience in this work along with specific professional development for leaders who lead high-needs schools.

Theresa, an eight-year experienced principal, stated, “Community Engagement and Partnerships; Social-Emotional Learning (SEL); Trauma-Informed Practices; PD from others with experience in leading high-needs schools.”

Elisa, a fifth-year principal, shared, “Strategies for staff resistant to change or who truly believe there is no problem with how things have been done in the past regardless of the outcomes or low proficiency; they are very confident in abilities but do not show results.”

Grace, acting first-year principal, noted, “Strategies and methods on recruiting and retaining high-quality candidates for our schools. Learning opportunities with our coaches and assistant principals.”

Katherine, a third-year principal, reported, “Creating systems to keep the focus with so many distractions. Using assessments and grading to monitor student progress, delegating appropriately, and managing new-generation educators, generational gaps.”

Brooklyn, an eighth-year principal, recommended “Leading people towards the practices that need to be changed to make positive changes in our learning environment.”

Throughout the CoP, the principals noted the benefits of this structure. One of the primary benefits of the CoP is that the principals share and transfer knowledge about leading high-needs schools. Next, each principal had a platform to exchange their expertise and experiences openly and gain knowledge to replicate in their schools. This knowledge sharing not only helped each principal but also expanded their understanding and disseminated valuable insights across the principals. Through regular interactions and discussions, each principal captured and codified the knowledge, making it more accessible to others. This process accelerated the learning curve for newcomers, enhanced problem-solving capabilities, and ensured that best practices were disseminated throughout the community of practice for principals who lead high-needs schools.

By bringing together these principals with diverse perspectives and expertise, the CoP encouraged exploring new ideas and approaches to the challenges of leading a high-needs school. Principals engaged in brainstorming sessions, shared unconventional solutions, and collaborated on the observation and feedback assignment that pushed the boundaries of existing knowledge on observing classroom teachers. Additionally, the safe and supportive environment of the CoP encouraged experimentation and risk-taking, as the principals were more willing to propose and test innovative ideas within their trusted community. This spirit of innovation not only benefited each principal but also led to building their instructional leadership teams' capacities on observation and feedback. The CoP drove the principals of high-needs schools to always focus on continuous improvement, adaptability, and flexibility.

Beyond their functional benefits, this CoP contributed to developing social capital within the principals who serve high-needs schools. As the principals interacted and built relationships

within the CoP, they established a sense of belonging and identity beyond being principals of high-need schools. This sense of community and belonging enhanced engagement and satisfaction, as principals felt valued and connected to their colleagues. Moreover, the CoP provided opportunities for mentorship, peer support, and professional network development, which can positively impact career growth and retention. Strong social ties forged within this CoP often extended beyond the workplace, leading to increased collaboration and knowledge exchange outside the formal boundaries of the community. In this way, CoP fostered a culture of learning, trust, and collaboration that filters the entire group of principals, creating that sisterhood.

Establishing A Sisterhood

Setting the Seed: Building Trust

An underlining theme that was created through the Community of Practice (CoP) was the bond of a sisterhood. These women, throughout meeting and collaborating, came together and represented different backgrounds and experiences in leading high-needs schools. Some knew each other or worked together previously in their educational careers. Nevertheless, this was a new adventure for all of them, and it was new for me as the supervisor. We had to establish trust first before we could move forward with this coherent framework and community of practice.

Building trust is a crucial element in both personal and professional relationships. Trust forms the foundation upon which partnerships are built, and it can take time to establish but can be easily eroded. To build trust, one must exhibit honesty, consistency, competence, and empathy, among other qualities. According to Covey (2006), trust is the "glue" that holds

relationships together and is vital for collaboration and cooperation. Theresa expanded this notion of trust through peer networking and soft skills:

Principals of high-needs schools require substantial support to effectively address the unique challenges we face. Here are some things that are needed to help in this endeavor: Peer Networking: Creating opportunities for principals to connect with their peers in other high-needs schools can be invaluable for building a relationship. Sharing best practices, problem-solving, and learning from each other's experiences can provide practical insights—soft skills like communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and critical thinking. I also believe that future professional development should come from others who have led high-needs schools and have a proven record of success.

Theresa spoke about soft skills; one of the major soft skills people hunger for is honesty. Honesty is fundamental in building trust. Being truthful and transparent in all interactions is essential. When people perceive that someone is consistently honest, they are more likely to trust that person. As Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) argue in their research on trust, honesty is one of the key determinants in the development of trust. By sharing information openly and admitting mistakes when they occur, individuals can demonstrate their commitment to honesty and foster trust in their relationships. As Grace, a first-year acting principal stated concerning making mistakes:

I do exactly what you said, coach, scripting out those conversations. They would be a whole lot of mess today. However, you are willing to sit and provide academic feedback. Furthermore, you allow us to make mistakes but let us know how we could have done it differently. Here are the things that you did well and maybe try this the next time: ask questions, ask questions, always ask the questions, and go to policy.

Through trust and building norms for the group of women, they could see what each of them brought to the group besides experiences, knowledge, and soft skills of being on time or time management to ensure all were successful. Theresa was the one who would email all the other principals reminders and how to organize their calendars so they would not miss a

deadline. At the same time, Brooklyn would share presentations and PowerPoints with the principals. Principals could view and lean on each other's competencies to problem solve or critically think through problems. Seeing each other's competencies played a major role in building trust in the CoP. Demonstrating expertise, skills, and the ability to perform effectively in the principal's role instilled confidence in each other. When principals consistently deliver high-quality work and make informed decisions, they are more likely to earn the trust of their colleagues and superiors. As mentioned by Covey (2006), competence is one of the dimensions that contribute to the credibility of the principals, and credibility is essential for trust to develop.

Another aspect of building trust is consistency. People tend to trust those who are consistent with their actions and aligned with the vision and mission of the group. When individuals consistently follow through on their promises and commitments, they demonstrate reliability and dependability. This consistency helps others feel confident that they can trust the person to do what they say. According to Mayer et al. (1995), consistent behavior over time builds trust because it reduces uncertainty about how a person will act in various situations. Katherine, a third-year principal, echoed these sentiments by saying that continued support with instructional and assessment practices aided her and the other principals. While Chelsea expounded:

So again, that alignment is clear, consistent, and concise. I am very system-based, anyway. So, that just, you know, matched, you know, because a lot of times when people do not know what to do. Then they make it up. So, if you know, you know exactly, I mean, really like they do. Furthermore, it is like who told you to do that, you know. Seriously, it just provides structure and clarity. You know, like I said, I cannot express enough because, you know, I have done this for a long time. and I tell the other principals who are in our portfolio because they are much younger in the principalship than I am. They are fortunate to have this because I did not have this when I started off. You know, these are things I had to figure out myself. Moreover, now you have the opportunity to have this support, this help, this guidance. It can. You know,

helps you prevent making mistakes. It saves time. However, I know they do not understand it because they do not know what it is like not to have it.

In conclusion, building trust is a multifaceted process that involves honesty, competence, and consistency, among other qualities. Trust is essential for the success of both personal and professional relationships, forming the bedrock of collaboration and cooperation (Covey, 2006). By consistently exhibiting these trust-building qualities, the principals fostered stronger and more meaningful connections with each other in leading high-needs schools, leading to greater mutual trust and respect in their relationships (Mayer et al., 1995).

Nurturing the Sisterhood

Within the group of principals leading high-needs schools, I found that they nurtured one another by being there for each other. Nurturing principals who lead high-need schools is crucial to the retention and success of their schools. These educational leaders prioritize building strong relationships with each other that transcend to their students, staff, and community. Research by Ingersoll and Strong (2011) highlights the significance of principal-teacher relationships in high-needs schools, emphasizing that principals who foster a sense of trust and collaboration can positively impact teacher retention and student achievement. Nurturing principals actively engage with their teaching staff, providing support, mentorship, and professional development opportunities to ensure that educators have the tools they need to excel in challenging environments. This commitment to professional growth enhances the principals' and teachers' effectiveness and helps create a positive school culture that is essential for student success (Louis, 2010). Elisa, a fifth-year principal, illustrates nurturing and how it transcended to her staff:

I can get ideas from the group in supporting the mental health of staff beyond tokens of appreciation and school improvement planning in individual or small groups with alike schools—the tips and tricks for when staff have conflicts. I know the process and steps, but stories from the field generate ideas and add some tools to the toolbox.

Furthermore, in nurturing these principals, they were able to recognize the unique needs and challenges in their schools. They could assist each other with problems and issues as they arose. They leaned on each other for ideas and thoughts to move through the daily tasks of a principal. They work tirelessly to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment that addresses the challenges faced by staff and students. Elisa, a fifth-year principal, felt she grew as leader through the conversations:

So, I think it has grown me as a leader in the same way that I am trying to grow my staff, especially this year, in regards to follow-up and accountability, because I think that so often we go and we hear a presentation, or we get told, like, you know, this is what you need to take back to your school and do. However, no one follows up with it. And so, having that cycle where you know this person is gonna be coming back to check on you. This person wants to see your evidence. You know all of that, like. It keeps it to your forefront in a job where it is so easy for things just to get pushed down and down and down on your to-do list. The group holds each other accountable, especially with the reminders.

Finally, nurturing the sisterhood allowed principals to have each other's back in the district meetings and within their buildings. They understood that their CoP of high-needs principals served as a community hub, and they leveraged this role to create a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. Research by Bryk and Schneider (2002) underscores the importance of community engagement in improving high-needs schools, emphasizing that principals who forge strong connections can garner additional support and resources for their schools. By nurturing these principal relationships, they created a bond to assist each other and built a comprehensive support system that benefits each of them as they lead a high-needs school.

The Legacy of the Sisterhood

Most sisterhoods, such as Sororities, have built a legacy of sisterhood. Within the CoP, the women principals in this study are building a legacy of determination, perseverance, collaboration, and social engagement. Each time the principals come together; it is a fellowship of women pulling for each other to win at their schools. When one is celebrated, the entire group is celebrated, and when one has trauma that is felt throughout the group of principals. They celebrated milestones together: weddings, promotions, and the birth of grandchildren. They leaned on each other during difficult times, such as illnesses, losses, and setbacks. Their sisterhood had become an essential part of their existence, a source of unwavering support and love. They compete against each other but with one another. They have built instructional standards of excellence that have been used by other principals within the district. This legacy has brought these six women together and bonded them over school improvement with a cadence of support to grow each of them as instructional leaders. As Theresa eloquently communicated, “The framework, CoP, has assisted me to grow and develop as a leader. Having the opportunities to learn and grow alongside colleagues with like needs has been valuable.”

Like a Sorority, the women enjoyed fellowshipping with one another during the portfolio meetings and even learning during a working lunch. So, these women enjoyed learning, fellowshipping, and collaborating with each other. As Theresa stated, “I like the portfolio aspect of the framework. It gives me an opportunity to talk, plan, and learn alongside other principals. Collaboration is pivotal in helping to share best practices.”

In conclusion, their legacy as a sisterhood extended beyond their duties as principals. They inspired other principals to come together and create their own sisterhoods or

principalhoods, but spreading the message of support, friendship, and empowerment throughout Pageford School District will be the legacy these women leave.

The Perplexing Plight of African Americans and Women Continues in Pageford School District

All the participants of the study within Pageford School District are women. Like *Post-Brown versus Board of Education*, among the female participants who lead at the elementary level, fifty percent of them are of African American descent. Within Pageford School District, African American women are mostly at the elementary level, and one hundred percent of them are principals of high-needs schools. At the secondary level, fifty percent of the principals at the middle school level are of African American descent, and seventeen percent are at the high school level. According to the research, two of the principals are at the middle school level, and they both lead a high-needs school. Unlike the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2007, Pageford School District employs twenty-four percent African American principals, but only one of the African American principals, a male, is leading a middle school that is not high-needs, while seven of the principals are serving at high-needs schools and they are all African American women. In addition, most of the African American principals within Pageford School District echo what Tillman (2004) stated, “African Americans serve mostly in underperforming schools and have significant numbers of vacancies or new teachers.” This is the reason for identifying a coherent framework that is not only theoretical but also practical.

Theresa declares this by saying:

I believe the specific professional development needs of school principals can vary depending on various factors such as school demographics, individual experience, strengths, and areas of growth needed for the principal. It must be practical and relevant for us.

Murtadha and Watts (2005) reflected on the struggles of African American principals facing stress and social injustices in leading high-needs schools. Chelsee expanded this notion by stating:

For one, I feel like the stress level is much higher. Usually, leaders who are in high-need schools are dealing with new novice teachers they are dealing with for lack of a better word in mature parents. You know, because when you think of the individuals that live in certain areas like a subsidized apartment, it will be younger people, younger parents. Typically, it is not a 2-parent home, you know. Sometimes, those couples can be immature, too, but typically, they are more mature and more stable. Thus, the children who come from those types of families usually are subjected to trauma.

With these continued practices in the educational system, a cadence of growth and development through a Community of Practice (CoP) is needed to grow and develop principals who lead high-needs schools. Unlike many African American principals who lead high-needs schools, the ones in Pageford School District do not have to worry about significant barriers of insufficient resources, lack of support, or lack of technology. As Katherine declared:

We are a rich district with an ample number of resources for our staff and students. Sometimes, I think we have too much at times for our staff to manage or become an expert on the resources. At times, we do not implement with fidelity. Nevertheless, we have one-to-one technology, laptops, for our students.

Chelsee, the veteran principal of the group, added, So, I know one of the things that, speaking for our district, we have put the position of the executive directors, you know. That is a new position for the county. So, that has been a layer of support that has been put in and added to the portfolio meetings. The addition of the portfolio meetings has provided an opportunity for collaboration because it is a more intimate group, and the topics and conversations and the support can be more targeted. Because you know it is not. It is all like schools, right? So, all high-needs schools are together, and we are all dealing with the same challenges. And so, again, that support can be more targeted, and so on. Because if you are if you have dealt with. You are dealing with it now. I probably already dealt with it. and so, if I have dealt with it successfully, then I can share some of the strategies that I have used with you.

Historically, the field of principalship has been dominated by white males (Parker, 2015), a trend that is slowly changing in response to growing diversity in school populations. The same

applies to the Pageford School District; men dominate the secondary level. Men occupy sixty-seven percent of the secondary level principalships; of the sixty-seven percent, eighty percent are white men compared to six percent at the elementary level. Again, we find that most women are at the elementary level, and sixty-seven percent of the participants serve as elementary principals. This differs from South Carolina, where women make up fifty-eight percent of the principals leading schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Recent years have seen an increase in female principals, although these numbers still do not proportionately represent the demographics of the student populations they serve. Women continue to fight to be positioned at those secondary principalships. This disparity raises questions about access to leadership opportunities and the systemic barriers that may still exist.

The data collected from the Pageford School District indicates that African American and female principals are stable but underrepresented in contemporary education. Gender and race continue to hurt the number of African Americans and women who attain leadership and policy-making positions in public education. Today's educational system is constantly under attack by various factions in our society. Troublesome issues in education will require the professional development of principals grounded in issues of race, gender, and class.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This improvement science study included a PDSA cycle to improve professional development to grow and develop principals to lead high-needs schools. Improvement science uses a PDSA framework that features short cycles of implementation of an intervention to determine if the intervention, a framework, will produce improved outcomes in an identified problem of practice. In this improvement science study, I implemented a framework outlining a cadence of coaching and mentoring to address the problem of the practice of growing and developing principals to lead high-needs schools. As principals' jobs evolve and demands have increased, principals need ongoing support and a community of practice to meet the day-to-day difficulties of the job (Rowland, 2017). Principals in this study found three key factors central to the effectiveness of professional development to lead high-needs schools: the learner-centric approach of active learning, continuous and ongoing professional development, alignment with school initiatives and needs of the principal through a framework with a cadence of support and collaboration, a community of practice. After the mini cycle, I adjusted the interview questions (Appendix H) to assist in answering the research questions: How do superintendents or their designees develop and grow principals to lead high-needs schools? How are superintendents or their designees currently developing and growing principals to lead high-needs schools? How can we identify a coherent framework to grow and develop principals to lead high-needs schools?

Based on my qualitative data analysis, the principals grew and developed skills for the lever of observation and feedback that can be replicated within any school district. Principals

were able to understand and know the instructional practices, trends, or patterns going on throughout the core of instruction. This is vital to principals who lead high-needs schools.

This chapter focuses on the “act” stage of the PDSA model, which involves implementing a coherent framework, the intervention, to bring about system-wide improvement on a larger scale. I will discuss the significance of this research, including areas of reinforcement and refinement. Also, the implications for higher education programs preparing candidates for principalships. Finally, recommendations for future study are suggested that can contribute to growing and developing principals to lead high-needs schools.

Significance

As Westberry and Hornor (2022) articulated, principals in high-needs schools need professional development beyond the preparation programs. I conducted this research study to examine professional development offered by the superintendent or his or her designee, especially for leaders of high-needs schools because most of these schools serve our black and brown students. In addition, I wanted to create a framework that supported the need for a professional development cadence around the seven levers, including a community of practice, mentoring, and coaching to change behaviors and build the capacity of the leaders. The Community of Practice (CoP) has been widely used in business models (Borges et al., 2017). Within the Community of Practice (CoP), principals engaged in discussing strategies for school improvement by focusing on one of the seven levers: observation and feedback. The principals were committed partners who aimed to think critically and problem-solve to address the issues hindering learning in their buildings. Principals were able to apply the tights and loose for observation and feedback directly, and the job-embedded cohort style provided them an

opportunity to collaborate in a safe space. This study is significant, showing that implementing the framework built the capacity of leaders in the lever of observation and feedback. Not only did the framework build the leaders' capacity, but it also expanded the knowledge of their leadership team and the teachers' instructional practices.

In my review of research, I found that implementing a coherent framework of ongoing professional development with a focus can and will create a learning chasm (Westberry & Hornor, 2022). This learning chasm has a direct impact on the principal's learning and self-efficacy, student achievement, and the teachers' learning (Fiaz et al., 2017). Furthermore, we had novice principals leading high-needs schools and needed to be equipped to handle the three roles of the building manager, instructional leader, and change agent (Westberry & Hornor, 2022). Therefore, to combat a gap in knowledge, tools, and strategies to lead high-needs schools, it was relevant to identify a coherent framework intentionally addressing observation and feedback and a community of practice.

Significantly, I found that the community of practice, along with mentoring and coaching, increased collaboration amongst the principals when I provided the time and opportunity. In addition, professional learning allowed the principals to apply the learning to observation and feedback directly and have a pulse on the instructional practices conducted in the classrooms (Haar, 2004). I implemented the PDSA cycle, designed to provide ongoing and continuous professional development through the coherent framework with the principals who lead high-needs schools. Being a thought partner with the principals with announced and unannounced visits, implementing opportunities to reflect on their action steps, and observing

classes with them enabled them to provide strategic feedback and coach their instructional coaches, assistant principals, and teachers.

These findings support Wenger's (2011) Community of Practice theoretical framework for best practice in professional development. As a former principal of a high-needs school, I could ask questions to guide the principals and be that thought partner so they could present ideas. Another advantage is that schools can work to achieve the district's goals as a unit instead of leaving them to their own devices (Westberry, 2020). This allowed me to share my experiences with them. Theresa stated:

Additionally, I believe it is important that others provide some professional development with experience and a track record of success in high-needs schools. Principals in high-needs schools were assigned to an Executive Director for mentoring and coaching to lead us through the process of facilitating academic achievement for our students.

Finally, the outcomes of this coherent framework are significant because it addressed the needs of the principals and provided them the opportunity to grow and develop their toolboxes to lead high-needs schools. For example, there were no additional costs associated with the framework. It relied on existing meetings and resources within the school district.

As documented in the literature review, principals of high-needs schools need coaching and mentoring coupled with the community of practice, role-playing, collaboration, and continuous professional development. Therefore, superintendents or their designees can apply this framework with their current staff by adjusting their meetings, allowing time for the principals to problem-solve together. As I noted, it does not matter how many years of experience they have in the position; they all benefited from professional development and growth. As women, they were willing to share their experiences, knowledge, and past experiences, emphasizing their needs, interests, and goals to transform their high-needs school.

To put it briefly, the qualitative study determined that principals who lead high-needs schools truly desire and want differentiated professional development to grow and develop to build successful schools and increase student achievement. These outcomes support previous research on the need for ongoing and continuous professional development (Westberry & Hornor, 2022). Furthermore, I had a principal move out of my study, causing my number to decrease in participants for the research which created challenges for me. If we truly want to improve our high-needs schools for our black and brown students across America, we must invest in training and professional development to grow and develop our principals to lead our most challenging schools and address the inequities we face as leaders.

Implications for Higher Education

Preparing principals to lead high-needs schools is a critical endeavor in higher education, with far-reaching implications for both educational leadership and the students these schools serve. High-needs schools typically serve students from disadvantaged backgrounds, facing numerous challenges such as poverty, limited access to resources, and diverse learning needs. Therefore, educating school leaders is essential for higher education to equip principals with strategies and tools to navigate these complexities effectively. It is not enough for these principals to earn their master's degree in administration; they need to learn the different avenues of leading a high-needs school.

One major implication of higher education is the need to prioritize the coursework for their candidates. In today's world of leading high-needs schools, it is not enough for the coursework to cover master schedules, busses, and budgeting, but there needs to be coursework on equity, social justice, and advocating for the needs of high-needs schools. As noted by The

Wallace Foundation, high-needs schools often have a higher proportion of marginalized students, and principals must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to address these disparities; *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*. Higher education institutions should incorporate coursework on culturally responsive leadership and strategies for narrowing achievement gaps to prepare principals who can drive positive change in high-needs settings. So, higher institutions must change and transform their coursework to align with the challenges of today's society.

Furthermore, higher education programs should emphasize developing strong interpersonal and communication skills. Principals in high-needs schools must foster collaborative relationships with teachers, parents, and community members to create a supportive and inclusive school environment. Theresa, an eight-year veteran, declared this by stating, "Soft skills like communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and critical thinking are crucial to principals leading high-needs schools." According to a study by Leithwood and Sun (2012), effective communication and relationship-building are crucial components of successful school leadership in high-needs contexts. If they do not develop or have these skills, the principals leading a high-needs school cannot encourage collaboration with teachers, and student achievement will not increase across the school building.

According to research conducted by Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) highlighted the significance of clinical experiences in preparing educational leaders for high-needs schools. So, another implication for higher education is to give their candidates experiences within high-needs schools. Each candidate should be required, before receiving their master's degree in administration, to have a minimum of one hundred hours within their practicum. This will give

the candidates a firsthand experience of what they must possess before taking a principalship at a high-needs school.

Another implication involves the integration of data-driven decision-making and instructional leadership into higher education programs for principals. Principals in high-needs schools need to be well-versed in using data to assess student progress, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions. Research by Robinson and Timperley (2007) emphasizes the importance of using data to inform instructional leadership practices within high-needs schools. Elisa echoed this sentiment: “Yes, we need the support and guidance in knowing how to move instruction.”

Finally, the preparation of principals to lead high-needs schools in higher education has significant implications for educational equity and student success. To effectively address the complex challenges of high-needs settings, higher education institutions must prioritize coursework on equity, social justice, interpersonal skills, practical experiences, data-driven decision-making, and instructional leadership. These efforts are crucial in ensuring that principals are well-prepared to impact the lives of students in high-needs schools positively.

Implications for South Carolina State Department of Education

As we see, principals play a pivotal role in the success of high-needs schools, and their leadership has significant implications for the South Carolina State Department of Education. High-needs schools typically serve, as we know, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, often facing academic and socio-economic challenges. Effective principals in high-needs schools can profoundly impact student achievement, teacher morale, and overall school culture. However, the challenges principals face in high-needs schools are unique, and State Departments

of Education must consider several key factors when supporting principals who lead high-needs schools.

First, the South Carolina State Department of Education should prioritize professional development and training for principals in high-needs schools. As noted within the study, these principals require specialized skills to address the unique challenges their schools face, such as poverty, underperforming, and lack of resources, which are barriers to learning for diverse students. We know that providing ongoing training and resources can help them develop the necessary competencies to lead effectively in these environments (Ingersoll, 2019). By investing and working with school districts with ongoing and continuous principal development, the State Departments of Education can ensure that high-needs schools have strong and capable leaders to transform the schools. Second, the South Carolina State Department of Education must work with school districts to address the issue of principal turnover in high-needs schools. These schools often experience higher leadership turnover rates due to the demanding nature of the role and the challenges they face (DeAngelis, 2020). High turnover can disrupt school improvement efforts and hinder stability. To mitigate this, the South Carolina State Department of Education should implement policies and incentives that encourage experienced principals to remain in high-needs schools and support succession planning to ensure a smooth transition when turnovers do occur. Furthermore, the South Carolina State Department of Education should consider the allocation of resources to high-needs schools. Adequate funding and equitable resource distribution are crucial to providing these schools with the tools and support they need to succeed. Principals in high-needs schools sometimes struggle with limited budgets, outdated facilities, and inadequate resources (Ladd & Singleton, 2018). The South Carolina State

Department of Education should advocate for policies that address these disparities and ensure that high-needs schools have access to the necessary resources to meet the diverse needs of their students. Next, the South Carolina State Department of Education needs to revamp its one-year program, the *Principals Induction Program (PIP)*, especially for those principals who are first-year principals in high-needs schools. As the research has demonstrated, principals serving in a high-needs school need differentiated professional development and not the same cookie-cutter professional development that all principals receive as first-year principals. The South Carolina State Department of Education needs to work with the school districts and implement a coherent framework with data-driven decision-making and instructional practices, which include the seven levers of *Leverage Leadership*.

In addition, the South Carolina State Department of Education should promote collaboration and community engagement in high-needs schools. Effective principals build partnerships with parents, community organizations, and other stakeholders to support student success (Dauber & Epstein, 2017). The South Carolina State Department of Education can facilitate networking opportunities and guide how to establish and maintain these essential relationships. By fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility, high-needs schools can better address the multifaceted challenges they face.

In conclusion, principals' leadership in high-needs schools has profound implications for the South Carolina State Department of Education. By investing in their professional development, addressing turnover, ensuring equitable resource allocation, promoting community engagement, and fostering data-driven decision-making, the South Carolina State Department of Education and the school districts can help high-needs schools overcome their unique challenges

and provide quality education to all students, regardless of their socio-economic background. These efforts are essential to narrowing educational disparities and improving overall educational outcomes for underrepresented student populations.

Implications for Superintendents and Senior Staff

Superintendents and Senior Staff who oversee principals responsible for high-needs schools face a complex and critical role in the education system. We know that high-needs schools typically serve students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or face other challenges, and they often require additional resources and support to meet the educational needs of their students. The implications of a superintendent's leadership in this context are multifaceted and can significantly impact the success of these schools and the students they serve.

At first, the thought was that the superintendent must have a strong commitment to equity and resource allocation for the schools. This commitment is crucial for principals who lead high-needs schools. High-needs schools often require more funding, additional support staff, and specialized programs to address the unique needs of their students. Superintendents must advocate for equitable distribution of resources, ensuring that high-needs schools receive their fair share of funding and support services. Research by the National Center for Education Statistics has shown that equitable resource allocation positively correlates with student achievement in high-needs schools (NCES, 2017). Secondly, effective communication and collaboration with principals is essential. Superintendents must foster a collaborative relationship with principals of high-needs schools to understand their specific challenges, needs, and goals. By working closely with principals, the superintendents and Senior Staff can provide targeted

support and professional development opportunities that address the unique needs of high-needs schools (Marzano et al., 2005). Thirdly, superintendents must prioritize instructional leadership. High-quality instruction is a key driver of student success in high-needs schools. Superintendents should support principals in developing and implementing effective instructional strategies and programs that meet the diverse learning needs of their students. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) suggest that instructional leadership at the school level is positively associated with student achievement. All participants in the study echoed this sentiment concerning support for instructional leadership. Fourthly, data-driven decision-making is critical. Superintendents and Senior Staff should encourage principals to use data to inform their instructional and organizational decisions. Analyzing student achievement data, attendance rates, and other relevant metrics can help principals identify areas for improvement and make informed decisions about resource allocation and programmatic changes (Supovitz & Taylor, 2005). Superintendents and Senior Staff should create templates or forms so principals in high-needs schools can readily interpret data to make informed decisions. Next, fostering a positive school culture is essential. Superintendents and Senior Staff should promote a positive and supportive school climate where all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and staff, feel valued and motivated to excel. A positive school culture is associated with increased teacher retention and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Lastly, superintendents and Senior Staff should be advocates for policy changes that address the root causes of inequity in education. This might involve advocating for changes in funding formulas, addressing disparities in access to advanced coursework, or supporting initiatives that provide wraparound services to high-needs students and their families. Superintendents and Senior Staff who are effective advocates for equitable

policies can have a lasting impact on the educational opportunities available to high-needs students (Baker et al., 2018).

In brief, superintendents and Senior Staff who supervise principals who lead high-needs schools play a pivotal role in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of vulnerable students. Their commitment to equity, collaboration, instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, school culture, and policy advocacy can make a significant difference in the success of principals who lead high-needs schools.

Implications for Principals Who Lead High-Needs Schools

As the six women in this study have shown, leading high-needs schools poses unique challenges and responsibilities for principals, with significant implications for both the educational outcomes of students and the professional development of school leaders. Principals in these schools must navigate a complex landscape to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students.

First, principals in high-needs schools must address the issue of resource disparities. High-needs schools often have limited funding and fewer experienced teachers than schools that are not classified as high-needs schools. This can hinder the implementation of effective educational programs and the provision of necessary support services. To address this, principals must have the skill set to advocate for equitable funding and allocate resources strategically to meet the unique needs of their students (Lachat & Smith, 2019). Second, principals in high-needs schools must focus on building a strong school culture that supports student success. Research indicates that a positive school climate can mitigate the negative effects of poverty on student achievement (Ferguson, 2013). Principals must foster an environment where students and

teachers feel safe, supported, and engaged in learning, often requiring additional social and emotional support services (Noguera, 2015). Third, effective instructional leadership is paramount for principals in high-needs schools. They must provide teachers with professional development opportunities and coaching to enhance their pedagogical skills, as well as implement data-driven decision-making processes to monitor and improve student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004). High-quality instruction is a key driver of student success, and principals play a pivotal role in ensuring that the instructional practices within the building are effective and efficient to increase student achievement.

Moreover, principals in high-needs schools need to establish strong partnerships with families and the broader community. Building trust and collaboration with parents and community organizations can increase parental involvement and additional support systems for students (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). This collaborative approach can help address students' multifaceted challenges outside of school and keep their eyes on their studies. In addition, principals in high-needs schools must pay close attention to teacher recruitment and retention. High teacher turnover rates can disrupt continuity and impact student achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Principals must create a supportive work environment, offer professional development opportunities, and provide mentorship to retain skilled educators committed to the school's mission and vision.

In summary, principals leading high-needs schools require a multifaceted approach that addresses resource disparities, fosters a positive school culture, emphasizes instructional leadership, builds strong partnerships, and prioritizes teacher recruitment and retention. Principals who can navigate these challenges can make a significant difference in the lives of

their students and contribute to closing the achievement gap, ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education.

Recommendations for Further Research

As a result of the study, there are always opportunities for growth as well as future research ideas on and about the topic. In this study, the framework addressing the lever, observation, and feedback, had principals changing their behaviors and practices by conducting observations and providing academic feedback to change the teacher's instructional practices. Typically, a rapid cycle of intervention in the improvement of the science model is required. My study encompassed two mini PDSA cycles that took place over six weeks. The small size of participants in this study limited a full analysis. As I stated, I had one member removed from the group, and the new person was a male. The male candidate did not align with my literature review or hypothesis concerning women. Therefore, the first recommendation would be for future research to use a larger sample size. With a larger sample size, there may be other themes discovered to develop or grow principals to lead high-needs schools. Another theme for further research is the continued plight of African Americans and women at the principalships and how we can change the future outcomes for them at the secondary level. Furthermore, the "why" behind the problem of practice still exists since *Post-Brown versus Board of Education (1954)*.

School Districts

The study can inform superintendents or their designees to redesign the framework of their leadership meetings, allowing principals to collaborate more with each other. This will engage principals in the district's goals and how they align with the school's goals. In addition, this could inform the district leaders to recognize and mind the learning gaps of their principals.

School districts could target the necessary support to equip their principals to lead high-needs schools.

Another recommendation would be for school districts to provide or restructure their present method of meeting with principals. Instead of a sit-and-get method, the district staff could arrange the principals into a Community of Practice based on their learning gaps or clusters of schools. In addition, at those principal meetings, district staff could have a monthly focus meeting and have the principals share backs, evidence of the task, or embedded professional development; this would be considered a district-wide professional learning community.

The final recommendation is regarding human resources. If we are going to have leaders to lead these high-needs schools, we need to determine if they have the competencies to do the work and transform the school. Superintendents or their designees determine the competencies they believe their principals of high-needs schools must possess or provide professional development to grow those competencies. Furthermore, school districts could reorganize the Senior Cabinet's roles and responsibilities to coach and mentor these leaders, especially if they are not going to hire an additional position to fulfill these duties. For example, the superintendent could either hire or reconfigure the duties of present staff members to focus on principal development and coaching to ensure their administrators have the appropriate tools necessary for success and increasing student achievement.

Future Research

Future research on principals leading high-needs schools holds significant potential for improving educational outcomes and addressing equity gaps in education. One promising area of

investigation is the impact of principal leadership styles on student achievement in high-needs schools. Researchers could explore how transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and distributed leadership practices affect student performance and school improvement efforts (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). This research could provide valuable insights into the most effective leadership approaches for principals in high-needs settings.

Furthermore, future research should focus on the intersection of principal leadership and school culture in high-needs schools. Research supports that school leadership is one of the ingredients in determining if a school will be successful with climate, culture, and student achievement. Understanding how principals can foster a positive and inclusive school culture that supports student success is crucial. Examining the relationships between leadership, teacher morale, and student engagement can shed light on strategies for creating supportive learning environments (Louis & Leithwood, 2013). According to Westberry and Horton (2022), future research should focus on building leaders, closing gaps, providing proper support, and equipping principals to lead schools, especially high-needs schools. The recommendations from this study are:

- Future researchers could conduct a study on a framework for principals' Community of Practice with onsite visits.
- Future researchers could identify a dual-factor model on principals' professional development.
- Future researchers could combine coaching, mentoring, and supporting novice and tenured principals.

- Future researchers could research practical frameworks for school districts to implement for principal growth and development.
- Future researchers could utilize a larger sample to conduct the research study.
- Future researchers could conduct qualitative and quantitative mixed-methods analysis.

In addition, there is a need for research that explores the unique challenges faced by principals in high-needs schools, such as resource constraints, student mobility, and community involvement. Investigating how principals navigate these challenges and strategically address them can provide valuable guidance for educational leaders and policymakers (Seashore et al., 2011). Moreover, future research should investigate the impact of principal turnover in high-needs schools. High turnover rates can disrupt continuity and stability, potentially affecting student outcomes. Studying the reasons behind principal turnover and its consequences on school improvement efforts can inform strategies to retain effective leaders in these schools (Grissom et al., 2015). Lastly, as technology continues to play an increasing role in education, research should explore integrating digital tools and strategies in high-needs schools. How principals leverage technology to enhance teaching and learning in resource-constrained environments is an area set for investigation. Understanding the innovative practices that can lead to improved outcomes in high-needs schools is essential for preparing principals to meet the evolving needs of their schools (Bower, 2017).

To conclude, future research on principals leading high-needs schools should delve into leadership styles, professional development, school culture, unique challenges, turnover, and technology integration. By addressing these areas, researchers can provide valuable insights to

support principals in their critical role of improving educational outcomes and promoting equity in high-needs schools.

Conclusion

There exists a great deal of research on K-12 teachers' professional development and the need for principals' professional development (Zepeda et al., 2014). Today's educational system continuously evolves, and the demands on a principal have increased with accountability, climate, culture, and student achievement. One of the central findings of this dissertation is the importance of targeted professional development and ongoing support for principals in high-needs schools. Investing in the growth and development of school leaders is not only a moral imperative but also an essential strategy for improving educational outcomes. Effective leadership development programs should be tailored to the specific needs and context of high-needs schools, providing principals with the tools, knowledge, and skills to navigate the unique challenges they face. Through this research study, I identified a coherent framework of coaching, mentoring through a community of practice, and thought partnership. This coherent framework demonstrated the need for principals to have continued support to lead their high-needs schools. There is a need for principals to have effective and practical professional development to move their schools. This study identified and researched a coherent framework that involved practical, intentional, and effective professional development for principals who serve high-needs schools. Research has demonstrated that effective principals set the tone for the school and the community. This research study mapped out active engagement ongoing and continuous professional development through a community of practice where principals collaborated on best

practices, shared ideas, and built capacity on observation and feedback to strengthen instructional practices for their buildings. Elisa expressed her sentiments:

So, I think the one thing that I have seen with the change, with the superintendent, and with the addition of the executive directors is that we actually have someone whose job is to focus on us. I, you know, I was a principal for 2 years before that position was created, and it seems like no one was really like our go-to if you needed. HR, you went to Alice if you needed, you know something else. You went to this person, but there was no person like that you knew, no matter what was about to be thrown at you. You could go to that person, and they could help you with professional development or getting the needed resources.

Chelsee, the lone veteran of the participants, echoed these thoughts: So, I know one of the things that, speaking for our district, we have put the position of the executive directors, you know. That is a new position for the county. So, that has been a layer of support that has been put in and added to the portfolio meetings. The addition of the portfolio meetings has provided an opportunity for collaboration because it is a more intimate group. and the topics and conversations and the support can be more targeted. Because you know it is not. It is all like schools, right? So, all high-needs schools are together, and we are all dealing with the same challenges. And so, again, that support can be more targeted, and so on. Because if you are if you have dealt with. You are dealing with it now. I probably already dealt with it. and so, if I have dealt with it successfully, then I can share some of the strategies that I have used with you.

Theresa, an eight-year principal, added: I like the portfolio, Community of Practice (CoP) aspect of the framework. It gives me an opportunity to talk, plan, and learn alongside other principals, networking. Collaboration is pivotal in helping to share best practices to transform your school and yourself.

In this dissertation, I have delved into the critical topic of leadership in high-needs schools, focusing on developing and growing principals to lead in these challenging educational environments effectively. Throughout this research, I have explored the multifaceted nature of educational leadership, the unique challenges principals face in high-needs schools, and the strategies and approaches that can be employed to enhance their leadership effectiveness. My investigation has revealed that leadership indeed matters significantly in high-needs schools. Effective leadership can transform these schools, elevate student outcomes, and create a positive

and supportive learning environment. However, it is essential to recognize that leadership in high-needs schools demands a distinct set of skills, qualities, and strategies, given the complex issues and resource constraints that often characterize these schools. Furthermore, I have highlighted the significance of fostering a collaborative and distributed leadership culture within high-needs schools. Principals cannot tackle these complex issues in isolation. Instead, the principals should engage with teachers, staff, students, parents, and community stakeholders to build a collective vision and implement sustainable improvements. Building strong relationships and creating a sense of shared responsibility is fundamental to the success of leadership efforts in high-needs schools.

In summary, the research presented in this dissertation underscores the critical role of leadership in high-needs schools and the importance of investing in the development and growth of principals who lead in these challenging contexts. To address educational disparities and challenges that persist in high-needs schools, educational policymakers, school districts, and educational leaders must recognize the unique needs of these schools and prioritize leadership development as a means of effecting positive change.

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Appendix A

Developing Principals to Lead High-needs Schools

You are invited to participate in a research study about principals' support while leading high-needs schools. Mona Lise Dickson is conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. Reginald Wilkerson, dissertation chair from the Educational Improvement Science at Clemson University.

OPTIONAL: You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a principal leading a high-needs school with viable information for the dissertation.

If you decide to participate in this research study, there are no known risks. There are no costs to you for participating in the study. You provide valuable information for supporting, coaching, and mentoring principals leading high-needs schools. The questionnaire will take about 60 minutes to complete the interview. The data collected may not benefit you directly, but the information learned in this study should provide more public benefits.

No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study. Individuals participating in the interviews will be given pseudonyms, and the Institutional Review Board may inspect these records. Should the data be published, no individual information will be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. By completing the interview, you voluntarily agree to participate. You can decline to answer any question you do not wish to reply to.

If you have any questions about the study, don't hesitate to contact Mona Lise Dickson, 20 Meagan Drive, 843-812-3027, and monad@clemson.edu.

The Clemson University Review Board has reviewed my request to conduct this project. If you have any concerns about your rights in this study, please contact Dr. Reginald Wilkerson.

Appendix B

Principal Interview Questions

This study will analyze how school districts strategically support principals of high-needs schools. Information will be collected and analyzed by a Clemson University Doctoral student. All information will be used for school purposes only and will be confidential.

I want you to feel comfortable sharing your experiences, so I will not include any information in my study that could reveal your identity. I have provided an informed consent document that details your involvement and how your information will be protected. [Hand out informed consent gives time for the individual to read and answer questions. Collect the signed form from the participant.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration in this study.

Principal Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been an administrator in this district?
2. How long have you been an administrator at a high-needs school?
3. What other position have you held in this district?
4. What preparations have you had as an administrator, especially in a high-needs school?
5. What support systems have the district provided you as a leader of a high-needs school?
6. How would you describe your support as a high-needs school leader?
7. What instructional support do you need to move your school forward?
8. How would you describe the support systems you receive from the school district?
9. What are the most significant challenges to being a leader of a high-needs school?
10. How would you describe the coaching and mentoring you receive from the school district?
11. How has the school district assisted you with the school improvement cycle?
12. What do you need to move your school from the Tier Three list as a school leader?
13. How do you explain the mentoring, coaching, and support you receive to move your school forward and off the Tier Three list?

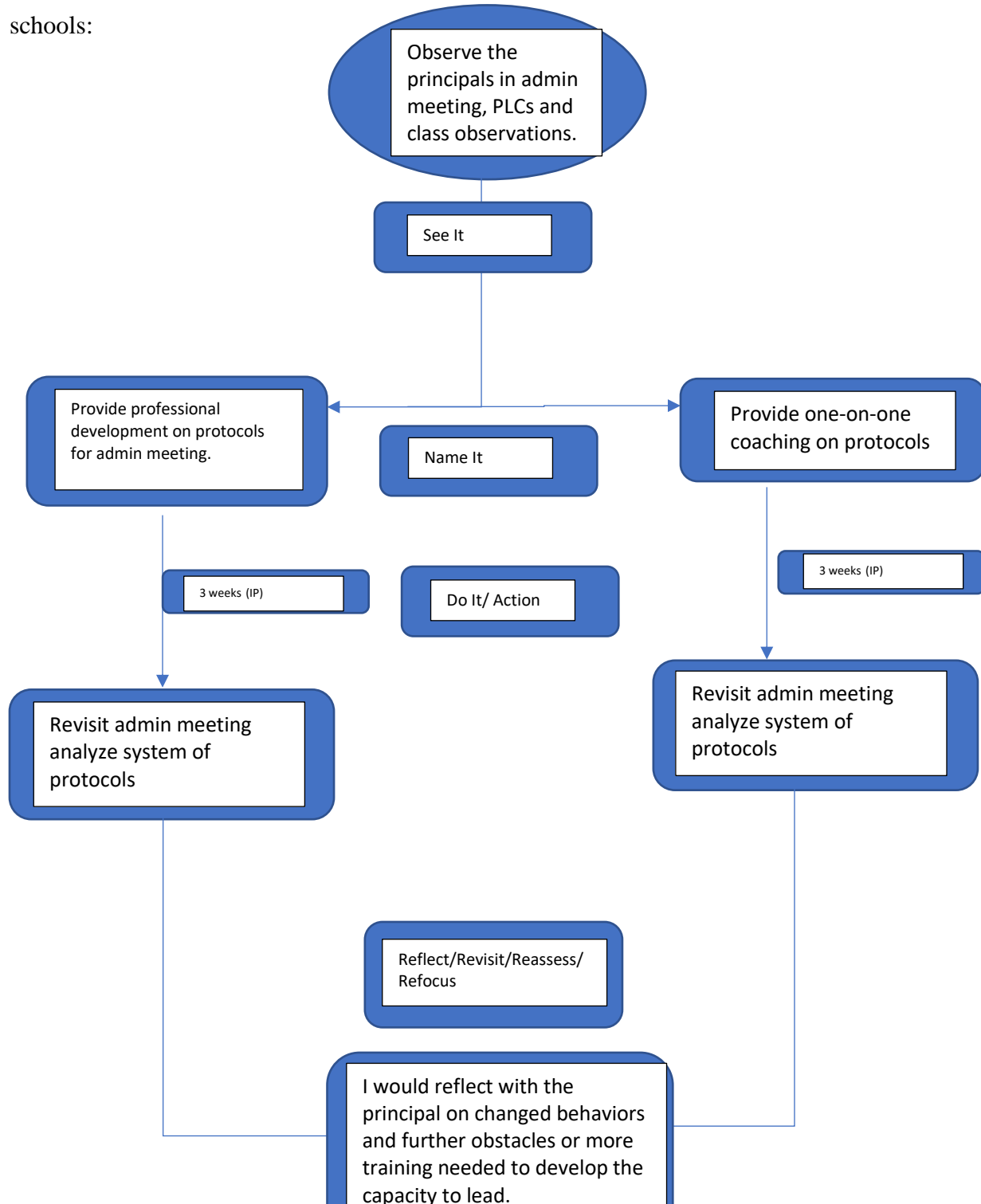
Appendix C

PDSA Worksheet
<p>Objective: Develop and implement a mentoring and coaching framework to systematically develop high-needs principals for school districts, especially the overall educational system.</p>
<p>1. Plan: Plan the test, including a plan for collecting data.</p> <p>Questions and predictions: The coaching and mentoring framework will develop principals of high-needs schools in targeted areas of the Levers aligned to the PADEPP standards.</p> <p>Who, what, when, and where: The coaching and mentoring framework will be integrated with eight principals of high-needs schools using Leverage Leadership protocols with the Communities of Practice, CoP. I will begin upon approval from IRB.</p> <p>Plan for collecting data: Principals of these high-needs schools will be measured through a needs assessment.</p>
<p>2. Do run test:</p> <p>Describe what will happen: Principals will be grouped according to the needs identified from the assessment.</p> <p>What data did you collect? Principals' evaluation of the coaching and mentoring sessions.</p> <p>What observations will I make or see? I will observe the principals implementing or applying the protocols learned within the professional development sessions.</p>
<p>3. Study: Analyze the results and compare them to the predictions.</p> <p>Summarize and reflect on what I will learn: I will learn if this framework will build the leadership capacity of the principals.</p>
<p>4. Act: Based on what I will learn, I will plan the next steps.</p> <p>Determine what modifications I should make-adapt, adopt or abandon: I will adapt, adopt or abandon according to the feedback provided by the principals.</p>

Appendix D

PDSA Flowchart

The PDSA flowchart of intervention cycles for developing principals who lead high-needs schools:



This cycle would repeat for classroom observations and PLCs utilizing the SC 4.0 Teaching and the Collaborative Structure's rubrics.

Appendix E

Sample Observation Schedule

The sample observation schedule required each principal to submit and share in the community of practice:

<u>Group 1</u>	<u>Group 2</u>	<u>Group 3</u>
Theresa	AP	MTSS
Jackson	Rivers	Walls
Rainsford	Campbell	Gardner-Page
McDonald	Blair	Ottavianelli
C. Simmons	Towsend	Thompson
Singleton	Mejia	Smith-Delaney
Close	Shaw	Thompson-Lewis
Ward	Good	Nutter
Floyd	Mennett	Washington
Dore	Church	Dr. Lichtenstein
Coach B	Pinion	Valentia
Wieler	Preston	Moneral
Alba	Evans	Walsh

Month	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May
Days to Observe	(20)	(21.5)	(18)	(14.5)	(17)	(19)	(19)	(19)	(20)
Area of Focus	PIC								
	S&O								
	WIN								
	Time								
Theresa	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
AP	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1
MTSS	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2

Grade levels we are coaching:

<u>TBA1/ELA</u> 1st Grade 3rd Grade 4th Grade	<u>TBA2/ELA</u> Kindergarten 2nd Grade 5th Grade	<u>TBA 3/Math</u> 1st Grade 4th Grade 5th Grade	<u>TBA 4/Math</u> Kindergarten 2nd Grade 3rd Grade
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Support staff that we will alternate (see table below)

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Pre- K Dr. L	SPED ML	Academic Arts Coach B Preston Weiler Valentia	Interventionists Floyd Church Pinion Dore (Leaves 12:30 daily, no Fridays) Washington

Appendix F

Observation & Feedback Tights and Loose

This table outlines the tights and loose created with the principals' input for conducting observations and providing feedback:

Observation & Feedback Tights and Loose

Plan. Roll out. Execute. Monitor (PBS)

Tights	Loose
Schedules	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Build a weekly observation schedule for the leadership team ● Establish and maintain observation schedule and tracker ● Minimum of 3 and Maximum of 5 walkthroughs/observations per week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identified focus for the week ● Adjusting the schedule based on the needs or trends to be addressed or to support struggling teachers
Feedback	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meet within 24-48 hours face to face ● Prepare and deliver concise feedback addressing the behaviors of effective and noneffective behaviors ● Create one action step for the teacher to implement that will give him/her and the class the greatest impact to be effective and efficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feedback can be on a jot form or Google form (electronically)
Modeling	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Model the effective behavior for the teacher ● Have the teacher to create a script ● Practice the gap with the teacher that will give the classroom and them the greatest impact and provide real time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● You and/or your instructional coach may model for the teacher or use a video to model the effective behavior (be present for the video)

feedback and redo	
Monitor and Follow Up	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Articulate clear next steps by setting dates for you and/or instructional team to follow up with teacher ● Send an invite to stamp the date and time for the follow up ● Set hand signals for real time feedback during follow up observation that is appropriate for the teacher ● Document 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● You and the teacher can determine the signals

Appendix G

Observation & Feedback Tights and Loose Evidence

This document was created for the principals and their leadership teams to analyze the observation data and be intentional about giving feedback to improve instructional practices:

Plan. Roll out. Execute. Monitor (PBS)

Evidence:	
Principal's Name:	
How many observations were completed by the principal? How many observations were completed by the Instructional Leadership Team?	
Feedback	
What was the focus of the observations by week? Out of the observations completed, how many did you post-conference with the teacher?	
Modeling	
What were the gaps of instruction noticed in a grade level, a teacher or schoolwide?	
Monitor and Follow Up	
Out of the observations that you followed up with, how much time elapsed between the observation and follow-up? Out of the observations that you followed up with, what was the action step? How are you documenting the follow-up and next steps?	

Appendix H

Revised Principal Interview Questions

This study will analyze how school districts strategically support principals of high-needs schools. Information will be collected and analyzed by a Clemson University Doctoral student. All information will be used for school purposes only and will be confidential.

I want you to feel comfortable sharing your experiences, so I will not include any information in my study that could reveal your identity. I have provided an informed consent document that details your involvement and how your information will be protected. [Hand out informed consent gives time for the individual to read and answer questions. Collect the signed form from the participant.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration in this study.

Revised Principal Interview Questions:

1. How do you describe effective professional development?
2. How do you describe current principal professional development needs?
3. How would you describe future professional development needs?
4. What type of professional development do you desire to lead a high-needs school?
5. What would you tell your supervisor about the type of professional development needed to lead your school?
6. How do the superintendent or their designees develop and grow leaders to lead high-need schools?
7. What are the needs of a leader leading a high-needs school?
8. How has the framework grown you as a leader and the people around you?
9. How has the cycle grown you as a leader?
10. How about giving feedback and having carefrontations with teachers? How has it grown you as a leader?
11. What type of professional development is needed to lead a high-needs school?

Appendix I

Fishbone Problem of Practice

This chart is a visualization of the problem of practice or the root causes of no systematic approach in mentoring, coaching, or developing principals to lead high-needs schools.

