

The Experiences of First-Year Principals in a Title I School

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Abstract

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of first-year principals in Title I schools in South Texas. Results revealed five significant themes: building relationships, knowing all stakeholders, COVID-19, lack of relevant experiences, and mentorship. Participants highlighted the significance of strong relationships with stakeholders as a primary leadership behavior for leading the learning. Discussion is centered on recommendations to enhance the foundation to prepare effective campus leaders in this new era of leadership.

Novice principals must meet the demands of constantly increasing state and federal accountability measures, student health and safety, teacher retention, instructional practice and delivery, remote learning, long hours with excessive workloads, community participation, hierarchical involvement, and must create an environment of high expectations that supports and nourishes the social, emotional, and well-being of students, staff, and promotes innovative thinking. A campus principal sets the vision and mission of a campus and must ensure a positive and collaborative school culture to achieve all goals and initiatives set forth. These demands are magnified for principals leading a designated Title I schools, which serve the highest number of low-income students.

Accountability standards drive student achievement to quickly become part of a first-year principals' primary focus. Bayar (2016) found that principals have a positive effect on students'

learning and achievement since the school principal makes administrative decisions that directly and indirectly affect student achievement. Unwelcome working conditions, high-level stress, and burnout cause principals to lose their desire to continue in their role and instead leave their profession. Thus, the trail to educational disaster is a result of leaders who are way in over their heads (Perry, 2011).

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to study the lived experiences of first-year, novice principals in a Title I school in South Texas and to identify effective strategies necessary to overcome obstacles and meet the demands in this new era of educational leadership. The discoveries provide school districts, administrative programs, and school leadership support teams the opportunity to engage in discussions on how to enhance the foundation to prepare effective school leaders for the future.

Research Questions

RQ1: What leadership behaviors and skills do first-year principals working in a Title I school identify as crucial for leading the learning?

RQ2: What obstacles are encountered by first-year principals in a Title I school?

RQ3: To what extent did the principal preparation program prepare first-year principals to meet the demands of this leadership role?

Literature Review

Leadership Preparation and Development

Future leaders aspiring to become principals depend on preparation programs to acquire the knowledge, character, and the self-efficacy they need to become school leaders, but research finds that principal preparation lacks rigor and the relevancy required to produce leaders that schools and students need (Camburn et al., 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; William, 2020). Deficiencies in preparation include such leadership skills necessary to manage people and organizations for results (Howley, C. et al., 2019; Hallinger & Wang, 2015) and lack of practical and contextual experiences to prepare future leaders (Davis, 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). To produce successful leaders, preparation programs must be deeply involved to create muscle memory to instantly apply their knowledge and skills to novel conditions (Fusarelli, B. C. et al., 2019).

Leadership Support

Thus, school leaders' success also depends on the professional development, support, and guidance provided to a principal. The creation of productive educational leaders requires the nurturing of habits, depth, and awareness (Fusarelli, B. C. et al., 2019; Marzano et al., 2005; Northouse, 2015). The principal should also be viewed as a learner who needs support and nurturing to discover his or her effective leadership style (Anderson, 2017; Fullan, 2016).

The role of a principal can take a toll even on the most dedicated leaders. Principals need a moment to renew themselves by enabling the opportunity to expand their specialized knowledge, connect with other professionals that are dealing with similar situations just like in other

professions (Linton et al., 2017; Northouse, 2015). Professional development programs are not only needed for teachers, but for principals to continue improving student learning, their learning community, and to remain passionate about their profession.

School Leadership

The principal's leadership role is critical to the overall effectiveness of the school (Fullan, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005). The school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school responsible for setting the tone of the school, the climate for teaching, the professionalism, and morale of teachers (Parson et al., 2016; Teasley, 2017). One can always point to the principal's leadership as the key to success (Marzano et al., 2005). Successful principals have the aptitude for drawing from various qualities, approaches, and skills to their current values and needs, and can embrace change if it adds worth to the education of all students (Fullan, 2016; Bolden-Vancourt, 2015).

The principal's role is recognized as the epicenter of leading school improvement (Fullan, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005). It is also responsible for leading the change on the ground (Fullan, 2016). Due to the increasing demands and expectations, Bayar (2016) and Fullan (2016) explained that the principalship has become so encumbered that it makes it impossible to reach and sustain reform. Fullan (2016) reported that 75% of principals feel that their role of the leader has become too multifaceted that half of all leaders feel under great stress, which can lead to mental health issues.

Lack of effective leadership behaviors, lack of support in dealing with instructional or operational obstacles, and lack of preparation can cause principals to abandon ship (Bayar, 2016; Fullan, 2016). First-year school leaders in the principalship are inundated with challenges to balance and meet administrative leadership duties, meeting the needs of their students and teachers, and listen to the demands of parents. Other challenges first-year novice principals experience includes long hours and an unyielding workload, accompanied by demands of various and diverse stakeholders (Bayar, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005; Wieczorek & Manard 2018).

The principalship is vital (Fullan, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005), and must be held by an individual who can transform many aspects that have a direct impact on students, teachers, and the community. When leaders establish a school culture, it creates a united responsibility where they share a common understanding (Lesinger et al., 2018; Marzano et al., 2005; Teasley, 2017). A collaborative community for a thriving campus culture was achieved by building relationships, encouraging high achievements, and fostering teacher collaboration (Lockton, 2019; Teasley, 2017; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). A leader cannot bring about a culture change of behavior and trust and build collegial collaboration without being able to communicate effectively (Lesinger et al., 2018; Teasley, 2017; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019; Tyler, 2016; Olsen et al., 2018).

Instructional Leadership

In education, strong and competent instructional leadership is crucial for improvements in student learning (Marzano et al., 2005; Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). The instructional leader at the campus is ultimately responsible for ensuring high-quality instruction is delivered to every student (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). A principal should aim to provide strategic resources and professional development designed and intended to improve the quality of teaching (Fullan, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson, 2011). After decades of implementation and global recognition,

it would seem logical that instructional leadership would rightfully rise to the priority focus. Instead, studies find that although leaders are cognizant of the importance of devoting time to instructional leadership, the multifaceted responsibilities a leader faces day to day make instructional leadership the aspect that receives the least amount of time and attention (Murphy et al., 2016; Parson et al., 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). This comes with great consequence. The effects of poor instructional teachers tend to have a lasting impact, especially if students have a weak teacher through consecutive years (Murphy et al., 2016).

Method

This phenomenological study sought to explore and understand the lived experiences of first-year principals in a Title I school in South Texas. In-depth interviews were conducted with open-ended questions that provided information that could unearth themes and patterns to identify effective leadership behavior, obstacles, and preparation that a first-year principal in a Title I school in South Texas.

Population and Sample

Using purposive sampling method, the sample of participants was identified and selected from South Texas, who are first-year principals in a similar district either at the elementary, middle, or high school level. The criterion for participation in the study required that participants be a recent first-year principal or currently serving in a Pre- Kinder to 12th grade and a campus principal assigned to a Title I school. Title I schools are federally funded and provided with supplemental tools to assist school districts with a large concentration of low-income students in meeting their educational goals.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher is viewed as an instrument (Patton, 2002). The researchers focused on collecting as much data and notable details about the respective principals via open-ended, in-depth face-to-face interview questions on a one to one basis. The researchers also incorporated other instrumentation such as field notes, and audio recording. Various means of validity strategies were used to guarantee the trustworthiness of the researchers' findings. A triangulation of data was examined when developing themes for this research, such as interview questions, researchers' field notes, audio recordings, and survey. The use of member checking utilizing the participants to decide the validity and accuracy of the qualitative findings on accounts and themes was applied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis Procedures

In this study, data was collected through in-depth interviews with open-ended questions for each participant. During this research, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) caused significant trauma to the school systems and the infrastructure of the learning environment for schools across the world. As a result, interviews had to be conducted via a ZOOM video conference. The major shift

in providing face-to-face instruction to remote learning caused major disruption. It influenced the participants and their first-year experience as a novice principal in a Title I school.

Participants' responses were video and audio-recorded, and handwritten field notes were utilized to ensure that all data be preserved for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To conclude the interview, participants received a questionnaire that allowed them to share further information or any additional comments. In the analysis process, the researchers organized the data by extracting all non-essential materials collected. The second step included filtering the data to generate categories, triangulate data sources to identify themes, or patterns for the analysis of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants. Nine first-year principals of a Title I school voluntarily participated in this research study. The participants included seven elementary principals, one middle school principal, and one early college high school principal. The demographics gathered from each participating campus were from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Texas Academic Performance Report. The following descriptive data about each participant represents student demographics at the time of the study.

Principal One previously served as an assistant principal in the same school district for eight years. The principal's campus had an enrollment of over 640 elementary students, of which 99.7% were Hispanic, and .03% were White. The total economically disadvantaged population being serviced was 96.3%. Of the students on the campus, 80.5% were English Learners (EL), and 89.4% were at risk.

Principal Two previously held a position as a dean of instruction in the same school district. The principal's current assignment as a first-year principal was at an elementary with 696 students. Of that total, 99.3% were Hispanic, and 0.4% were White. The total economically disadvantaged population being serviced was 93.4%, 70.5% were English Learners (EL), and 88.4% were at risk.

Principal Three previously served as an assistant principal at a middle school in the same district prior to assignment as principal of a Title I school. The principal's assigned campus had an enrollment of 563 elementary students, 99.1% of which were Hispanic, and 0.9% were White. 88.1% were considered low socioeconomic, 50.4% were English Language (EL), and 68.7% were at risk.

Principal Four was a teacher and an assistant principal for eighteen years on the same campus. The campus had an enrollment of 493 elementary students: 99.8% Hispanic and 0.2% White. The percent of economically disadvantaged students was 96.3%. Of the total student population, 71% were English Learners (EL) and 85.2% were at risk.

Principal Five had previous experience as an assistant principal for four years before becoming a campus leader in the same school district. The campus had an enrollment of 662 elementary students, 99.5% of which were Hispanic, and 0.5% of which were White. At this campus, 88.1% of students were economically disadvantaged, 54.2% were English Learners (EL), and 77.5% were at-risk.

Principal Six had fourteen years of leadership experience in the same school district and served five of those years as the assistant principal of the assigned campus. The campus had an enrollment of 515 elementary students where 100% were Hispanic. Of those students, 71.7% were identified English Learners, and 82.7% were at-risk.

Principal Seven had previous experience as an assistant principal experience at the same school. Of the 408 enrolled, 100% were Hispanic, 93.1% were economically disadvantaged students serviced were 93.1%, 21.3% were English Learners, and 56.1% were at-risk.

Principal Eight also had previous assistant principal experience at the same campus. Of the 729 middle school students enrolled, 99.3% were Hispanic, 0.7% were White, 90.7% of the population was economically disadvantaged, 51.7% were English Learners (EL), and 79.1% were at-risk.

Principal Nine had four years of assistant principal experience before being promoted to lead the school. A total of 449 elementary students were enrolled of which 99.1% were Hispanic, and 0.9% were White. The population also consisted of 90.2% who were economically disadvantaged, 55% were English Learners (EL), and 75.3% were at-risk.

Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of a first-year principal in a Title I school in South Texas to identify effective strategies necessary to overcome obstacles and meet the demands in this new era of educational leadership. The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What leadership behaviors and skills do first-year principals working in a Title I school identify as crucial for leading the learning?

RQ2: What obstacles are encountered by first-year principals in a Title I school?

RQ3: To what extent did the principal preparation program prepare first-year principals to meet the demands of this leadership role?

Findings are supported through the in-depth interview process, which allowed for a detailed description of the principal's lived experiences. After a thorough and repeated analysis of the interview data, the following overarching themes emerged: *building relationships, knowing all stakeholders, COVID-19, lack of experiences, and mentorship*.

Building Relationships

All nine novice first-year principals mentioned the importance of establishing a foundation through making connections. Principal Six shared, "We always made it about relationships, and having that relationship with staff, having a relationship with students, having relationships with the community, but also throughout the district." All participants found common ground to a critical component in their "*leadership behavior*" as a first-year principal in a Title I school. Principal Seven stated how "I am a servant to my staff every member from bus drivers to custodian to the cafeteria workers. I do not see myself above anybody else on the campus."

According to Northouse (2015), leaders comprehend the tasks that must be accomplished, but they also can connect with the people who assist in doing the job. The novice leaders understood the relevance and impact on the campus culture when it came to establishing relationships. Principal Five further elaborated on her leadership behaviors when she explained that "We are a family and we pull together because we know that at the end of the day, the goal is to be successful."

A commonality on how Principals Three, Five, Eight, and Nine described their relationship with their staff was family. Principal Nine referred to the organization as a "very big family," while Principal Eight used the metaphor "very motherly" to describe campus relationships. A principal's

efforts in forming relationships might be the cornerstone in framing a focused community (Marzano et al., 2005).

Knowing All Stakeholders

The second theme that emerged was knowing all stakeholders as an *obstacle encountered* by first-year principals in a Title I school. To have a collective efficacy, you must know your community of stakeholders to increase the success of the organization (Marzano et al., 2005). Principal One pointed out that “knowing the families and the area of needs” was challenging. While Principal Three vocalized how “very difficult parents” require you to “just listen and script to start addressing their points, so that is the obstacle in trying to win over all your parents.” Successful change requires you to maximize the staff’s abilities and place them in the areas of the organizational need. Further insight by Principal Eight shared how “knowing your teachers and their abilities to provide that instruction to students” was necessary. Principal Six further elaborated this theme stating:

I think one of the major obstacles is getting to know the staff you will be working with because they have been in that campus working together, so you are coming in not knowing them, not knowing the dynamics of the campus as far as the staff, students, and parents which is difficult.

Knowing all stakeholders also involves delving further into their personal lives to provide the support they require. Principal Eight explained:

We have different students, some that come from single home families, from parents who are incarcerated or living with grandma since they are not wanted. All these different factors as a principal, you need to know who you are servicing and the strategies the interventions you need to provide them while they are at school.

COVID-19

Another obstacle that first-year principals encountered was navigating through the uncharted waters of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fullan (2016) mentioned how the leadership of schools requires you to seek for a “miracle worker” (p.127). Principal Nine elaborates, “The fact is I am a COVID-19 principal, and I didn’t start physically with them and experience the routines we have at the beginning of the year. We had to find a way around that,” and other leaders corroborated the sentiment. Principal Eight validated the sentiment by saying, “I would say this is not a normal year. Coming in as a new principal to this type of setting, that in itself takes the cake.”

Other struggles due to the pandemic included Principal Five sharing further, “The pandemic is the first one because of the fact that we are in a virtual city with no guide, and where it is safe to say you learn as you go.” Principal Four added, “I mean, the challenges that they are facing right now, virtually, it is quite a bit.” Further insight by Principal Four explaining,

I think the fact that our students live in colonias [residential development characterized by substandard living conditions] and, you know, the fact that they don’t have towers near their home to be able to get connectivity all of that is a challenge.

The struggles these leaders were facing were demonstrated in their demeanor; although the meeting was virtual, you could feel the pressure mounting. Principal Three shared another obstacle because of the pandemic was “needing a lot of support in TESS and doing it virtually” since walk-throughs were still being expected in the district. Although COVID-19 has truly challenged these leaders Principal Nine said, “I feel we’re a big family, very supportive, which I think is one of the beautiful things that came out of this pandemic.”

Lack of Relevant Experiences

During the analysis to capture the importance of the data to the research question, another theme emerged. The researcher looked at the principal preparation program’s extent to prepare first-year principals for their leadership role. Data gathered from the interviews documented seven out of the nine principals felt that the preparation program lacked the relevant experiences needed to succeed. Principal Eight reflected and mentioned, “This is my first year as a principal, and I see it now how it fails to prepare you to be in the actual setting.” Principal Five added:

It’s going to be like a teacher preparation program where nothing prepares you well enough because you’re in the best case scenario at the preparation program where you have ideal teachers, ideal students, and ideal parents, and that is not the case at the campuses where you have to work together and honestly pull it from your experiences.

Principal Four shared, “I understand that the principal preparation program at the universities is needed, of course, but I think the experience that you have when you are actually on campus, those experiences are going to help you in your role.” Also, Principal One felt that “We did not have the time to really dig into getting in the trenches and experiencing what a principal experience.” The statement from Principal One collaborates with what Principal Three explained as “We needed to have spent more time with shadowing the principals” as a possible solution to the lack of relevant experiences from the preparation program.

Mentorship

This qualitative study was focused on one school district in South Texas, which had Title I campuses with first-year principals. In the process of peeling the layers of data and further analyzing, an unexpected theme emerged. During the individual interviews, principals mentioned various modalities of mentorship. Principal Seven shared, “The mentor program was extremely helpful, and my mentor was just a phone call away.” Further corroboration continues from Principal Six, Principal Eight, and Principal Nine stating, “I am part of a mentor program.” Delving further into the interview, Principal Seven explained that “The new principal academy was where they would have monthly meetings which were extremely helpful and gave insight on the different things such as the budget, human resources, schematics and so forth.”

The conceptual interest began when Principal Three divulged, “I have a mentor still, and I’m going to have a mentor for the next two more years just to make sure that we’re on the right track and don’t forget anything, and it is nice to know that we can go to them.” This interview resulted in first-year principals having an assignment mentor, partaking in a principal academy program, and sustaining the mentor for two additional years. Principal Three shared,

We would meet with this mentor at least once or twice a month depending on what we were doing, so having those conversations with a mentor and the other mentees was very helpful. It was like we weren't forced to go because we wanted to go.

Contributing further was Principal Nine by expressing,

Anybody who's a first-year to three-year principal will have a mentor, and I love that because any questions I have they will cover and things that all principals are going through and just discuss how you're feeling. I think that is very smart in part of the district because there are things that we, as new principals, are afraid to ask.

Discussion

Leadership in today's educational system is increasingly demanding especially as new state and federal guidelines evolve and unprecedented challenges like COVID-19 arise. Despite those challenges, a principal is still responsible for the rise or fall of a school regardless of the years of experience. Novice principals must unravel the leadership role's complexity and academically have students perform irrespective of their demographics, change of environmental settings, and instructional needs. In this study, the theoretical framework directed the researchers in the sagacious progression of the phenomenon of the lived experiences of first-year principals of a Title I school in South Texas. Five noteworthy themes arose that resounded from this qualitative study: *building relationships, knowing all stakeholders, COVID-19, lack of relevant experiences, and mentorship*. Key findings in this study demonstrated how building relationships was a leadership behavior and skill that principals in a Title I schools identified as critical to leading the learning. The obstacles these nine novice principals faced was COVID-19 and getting to know all stakeholders. In regard to the preparation programs, the principal's perception was that their lack of experience was the missing piece. Strong mentorship was revealed as a contributor to novice principal success in a Title I school, but lacking in the personal experiences of participant included in this study.

RQ1: What Leadership Behaviors and Skills do First-Year Principals Working in a Title I School Identify as Crucial for Leading the Learning?

Leadership is a process that includes the influence of the leader, the organizational dynamics involved in the leadership, and establishing a common goal (Northouse, 2016). Novice principals regarded building relationships as a vital factor in their leadership behavior. In the literature review, collegial collaboration is part of developing a collaborative community. Leadership behavior is demonstrated through making connections and a supportive system built on trust to create the mechanisms essential to engage in collaboration (Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). To establish a collaborative organization, a leader must build relationships and promote high success, which is the essence of a thriving campus culture (Teasly, 2017; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). Principal Four expressed, "Those good relationships I have built has made our campus stronger," which supports the findings. While building a relationship also ties to establishing a campus culture also mentioned in the peer-reviewed literature. Often, the organization is blinded

by the campus culture because it is unseen, but it binds and holds together the unison of a school (Teasly, 2017).

RQ2: What Obstacles are Encountered by First-Year Principals in a Title I School?

Findings show that first-year principals identified knowing all stakeholders as an obstacle. This corroborates the findings of the literature review as part of the collegial collaboration and school culture. Research has shown that the struggle leaders face fostering teacher collaboration even though there are benefits is evident (Lockton, 2019; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). The findings of this study demonstrate how building a relationship is seen as a benefit to leadership behavior. However, novice first-year principals found challenge in creating that atmosphere in their organization. Principal Six explained,

I think one of the major obstacles is getting to know the staff you will be working with because they have been in that campus working together, so you are coming in not knowing them, not knowing the dynamics of the campus as far as the staff, students, and parents which is difficult.

In the literature review, no conclusions were listed as to how leaders should navigate through a pandemic. As a result of the timing of this study, principal participants noted added complexities brought about due to COVID-19. Findings tie back to the challenges these novice leaders were experiencing with the exhausting hours and never-ending workloads in addition to meeting the demands of the diverse stakeholders and constantly changing environments (Bayar, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005; Wieczorek & Manard 2018). All school leaders had to learn quickly to navigate through the pandemic. The added challenge was seen in the first-year principal's ability to practice transformational leadership. In order to adapt the instructional setting from face to face to remote learning, the novice leader had to establish a new vision and lead into unknown territory. It was essential for the stakeholders to take a leap of faith (Jensen et al., 2019; Northouse, 2015). Principal Five said, "The pandemic is the first one because of the fact that we are in a virtual city with no guide, and where it is safe to say you learn as you go."

RQ3: To What Extent did the Principal Preparation Program Prepare First-Year Principals to Meet the Demands of This Leadership Role?

Participants felt that they lacked the relevant experiences required to meet the demands of the leadership role. Principal One expressed, "We did not have the time to really dig into getting in the trenches and experiencing what a principal experience." The findings validate with the literature review on the leadership development programs. They mention the lack of preparation programs providing hands-on experiences (Davis, 2016; Howley, C. et al., 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), which is a critical component to future leaders, and which affects the overall effectiveness of the program (Davis, 2016). Various studies also showed weaknesses in the leadership programs and how they lacked meaningful practicums and direct experiences (Davis, 2016; Fusarelli, B. C. et al., 2019; Howley, C. et al., 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

In culmination, a solid base of support and mentorship was revealed as an important contributor to the novice principal's success. Reflective of literature on supportive networks for new leaders, participants voiced a call for stronger support and longer-lasting mentorship in the

critical first years of school leadership. One school district included in this study established an internal principal leadership academy. The academy provides novice principals with monthly meetings on topics of interest directly impacting campus leadership. Novice principals are paired with a mentor for the first 3 years of the leadership experience. First-year principals who participated in this study and benefitted from the principal leadership academy expressed high regard for such support and credited their feelings of success to that guidance.

Regardless of their years of experience, the leadership role of a principal is crucial to the level of effectiveness of the school (Fullan, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005). In this study, findings indicated that participants' perceptions based on their lived experiences as a first-year principal of a Title I school depended on building relationships as a leadership behavior in order to lead the learning. Participants revealed that COVID-19 and knowing all stakeholders were the main obstacles faced in the first-year principal experience. Principal participants also revealed that their experiences in the novice role brought forward the realization that principal preparation programs lack comprehensiveness as they felt underprepared for the role.

Implications

The findings revealed the critical value that novice principals place on building relationships as their primary leadership behavior to create that culture change required to lead the learning and be successful. If principals must build strong relationships, they must know all stakeholders. Building relationships should not be a secondary action for a first-year principal nor any school leader. The value we place on the human factor in our organization will determine whether success lies ahead or is lost among the job's intricacies. The findings of this study give merit to the guidance that novice principals must prioritize connection with and for students, parents, teachers, and all stakeholders. As a first-year principal in a Title I school building relationships must be seen as forming the perfect triangle to establish true change for leading the learning.

One can estimate that is never the conscious intent of a novice leader to fail. The concern is that many first-year principals lack proper mentorship and support. Supportive networks must be established, like the 3-year principal leadership academy, so that new school leaders can create a stable relationship with colleagues and mentors, and to establish a strong sense of confidence in the principal's ability to lead despite all the challenges. With sustained support and mentorship, novice principals can build confidence and leader self-esteem through opportunities for reflective discussions and negotiate leadership of instructional practice. It is the concept of building capacity and strengthening the team, for when that is accomplished, increases in student achievement and improvements in school culture are sure to follow.

The findings also shed light on principal preparation. The study was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but this did not distract from the researchers' ability to investigate and understand participants in their natural setting. In fact, the reported stresses resulting from the pandemic aided in revealing the deficits of principal preparation program crisis training for novice leaders. Schools have emergency plans of actions for fire, bomb threats, active shooter lockdowns, but none for a pandemic and in this case, the related transition to online learning. Preparation programs should build in various courses on navigating through the intricacies of virtual instruction. The pathway should provide instructional practices supporting teachers on sustaining the rigor through virtual lessons and continuing to engage all learners-further building into how to

properly evaluate teachers. Preparation programs should feel compelled, now more than ever before, to prepare future school leaders with training focused on crisis management, change leadership, innovation and self-care. Sustaining mental health and learning how to disconnect from the role must be Principalship 101. Organizations should consider opening up the lines of communication and dialogue with first-year principals to enhance and adjust to improve the overall yield performance of novice leaders.

Conclusion

The results of this qualitative method of study brought to light the challenges novice principals face in a leadership role. Results serve to inform and provide school districts, preparation programs, and school leadership support teams the opportunity to engage in discussions on how to enhance the foundation to prepare effective campus leaders for the future. According to the findings, it is evident that novice first-year principals in a Title I school require much support. As an educational system, we cannot allow our novice principals to learn -in the trenches. Valuable experiences must begin during our future leaders' most formative time to make a significant stride in the quality of leadership servicing our most significant populations. Leadership preparation must work to bridge the gap between theory and effective leadership practices. Above all, we must also recognize the essential human aspect of educational leadership that consists of building relationships. The cornerstone and challenge of every school leader begins with making a connection to create change to pursue the vision and mission towards academic success.

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